Messages to Our Brothers and Sisters

(On the Other Side of the Wall)

New Mexico Office of African American Affairs
2007

MH08D8881

Special Acknowledgement

Governor Bill Richardson

The New Mexico Office of African American Affairs would like to acknowledge the continued support of the Honorable Bill Richardson, Governor of New Mexico. He has given this Office additional standing and has made it unique. There is no other Office like it in the United States. This statement is made because Governor Richardson allows the Executive Director of the New Mexico Office of African American Affairs to sit in his Cabinet. This executive decision reflects his concern and respect for Diversity.

Acknowledgement

Mr. Joe R. Williams, New Mexico Corrections Department Secretary, has been extremely supportive of this essay writing project. Secretary Williams directed his Educational Bureau, Wardens at the correctional facilities, and others who work directly with the inmates to assist me in the collection of essays. He and I had several conversations regarding the prison system and the education and services provided by his Department. Secretary Williams has made a commitment to provide inmates the opportunity to better educate themselves and seek training opportunities while incarcerated. Secretary Williams believes that if inmates take advantage of the services and classes offered, they will be better prepared when they return to their respective neighborhoods and communities. I look forward to my continued education about the New Mexico Correctional System.

A special thanks to Ms. Gail Oliver, Education Bureau Chief, and Ms. Catherine Carpenter, ABE Program Manager of the New Mexico Corrections Department, for their cooperation and assistance given towards the development of this project.

Secretary Joe Williams

Acknowledgement

The New Mexico Office of African American Affairs secured the professional services of Ms. Elaine Brown to carefully read each essay and make editorial corrections. Ms. Brown had the task of editing the writings so they would fit into the format of this publication. Grammar and sentence structure were analyzed and modified. However, the intent and message sent by the contributing inmates were not affected. Some names were omitted if they were not those of participating inmates. Each inmate signed a release form, and the decision was made not to use any identifying names without written permission.

Ms. Brown developed the chapter titles and organized the essays according to category. She worked diligently to preserve the integrity of the autobiographical stories submitted. The task of editing and maintaining the pure substance and effect of the essays was quite an accomplishment. Ms. Brown most certainly "captured the spirit and essence" of these stories. I greatly appreciate her passion to work on this important project, and her dedication to ensuring that the voices behind the walls are projected in proper context. She was also selected to work on this project because she is personally committed to working for positive changes in the American correctional system.

Ms. Elaine Brown is an established writer and author. She is the author of A Taste of Power and The Condemnation of Little B. Ms. Brown is presently co-authoring, with Karima Al-Amin, For Reasons of Race and Belief, The Trials of Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (formerly H. Rap Brown) which is slated for publication (by Carroll & Graf) in 2008. Ms. Brown is also a former leader of the Black Panther Party.

Thank you My Sister!!

Acknowledgements

I would like to personally thank the Albuquerque Journal Publishing Company for the services of Ms. Debra Dominguez-Lund, Journal Reporter, who wrote a compelling newspaper story about this writing project. The title of her article "Writing the Wrongs, Stories from the Inside" was exceptional. Ms. Dominguez-Lund, as she always does, captured the heart and soul of this Inmate writing project. Her article gave this writing project proper introduction to the New Mexico Community.

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I would also like to acknowledge the services of Ms. Marla Brose, Albuquerque Journal Photojournalist, for entering the correctional facilities and taking pictures of inmates. The cover photo was taken by Ms. Brose, and it sends a powerful message. Thank you.

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Ms. Grace McCormick is an exceptional poet and person. She was asked to develop several poems that would send positive messages to our youth. She did just that. I also had to persuade her to allow me to acknowledge her works in this publication. Ms. McCormick is very humble and private. It is hard for her to accept credit even when she deserves it.

Ms. McCormick has a way with words. One can tell by her poetry. While in New Mexico, she dedicates a majority of her time working with and teaching young people the art of poetry. She is developing a young poet's society and organizing the Choice Club. According to Ms. McCormick, the primary purpose of the Choice Club is to influence teens to make informed decisions and choices, on a daily basis, about their lives.

Although she prefers to be called Grace, I would like to take this opportunity to say thanks to Ms. Grace McCormick.

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MESSAGES TO OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS
(On the Other Side of the Wall)

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DISCLAIMER

THE VIEWS, OPINIONS AND STATEMENTS EXPRESSED BY THE PARTICIPANTS IN THIS PUBLICATION DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE OPINION OR PHILOSOPHY OF THE NEW MEXICO OFFICE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AFFAIRS OR THE STATE OF NEW MEXICO.

Editor's Note

To the Brothers and Sisters who wrote essays for this project, all of which are not included here, please know that, in my role as editor of this volume, my intent was to honor your stories. In the absence of direct communication with you, I have had to make editorial decisions on my own. Most of my decisions related to cutting extraneous sentences and meandering monologues. In the end, I have tried to capture and hold fast to the spirit and essence of the story of your incarceration and give voice to your life and your humanity.

These essays demonstrate that the human potential has the capacity *to survive even the most inhumane circumstances, demanding we work to eliminate such circumstances so that this potential is not crushed for all time, as they force us to recognize the need to establish a new paradigm for addressing offensive behavior, and urge us ultimately to seek the transformation and humanization of this whole society, toward a world without prisons.*

Elaine Brown
Brunswick, Georgia
February 2007

Introduction

Harold Bailey, PhD

The New Mexico Office of African American Affairs is genuinely concerned about the alarming rates of incarceration of African Americans. New Mexico has an African American population of 1.9%. In the State's 12 correctional facilities, African Americans comprise between 4% and 12% of the inmate population. One can already see the disparity of these numbers. This same phenomenon is reflected on a national level. There are over two million incarcerated individuals in our prison system. The national population of African Americans in the United States is 13%, yet, African Americans reflect 50%, or one million of the inmate population. Any fair-minded thinking person doing the math knows that this condition is alarming and has a chilling effect on the African American Community. It is extremely difficult to imagine that this particular group of people, or any group people, would have almost four times its population percentage incarcerated. I contend, that there is a strong possibility

that social, economic and racial factors enter into this "housing" of African Americans in our prison system.

As Executive Director of the New Mexico Office of African American Affairs, I felt it was my responsibility to make a concerted effort to break the cycle of incarceration of African American youth and young adults. The numbers of incarcerated African Americans in New Mexico and America influenced me to seek assistance from those already incarcerated here in the Land of Enchantment. It is my responsibility to develop a strategy that might help those who will listen to the voices from behind our prison walls. I asked and received permission to enter New Mexico's correctional facilities. My primary purpose was to seek assistance from inmates to develop a collection of essays in an attempt to convince our youth to make better choices, and not choose a life of crime.

In order for this project to be credible and penetrating, I had to gain the confidence and trust of the inmates. I told them that I was sincere in my efforts and could not pull this project together without their participation. I would like to commend these inmates for being excited about this publication and contributing to it. The response from inmates was overwhelming, and the fact that we were able to collect over 60 essays was astonishing. This collection of writings could be a first for the State of New Mexico and possibly the first among a few states who have initiated such a project for publication.

As you read through this book, you will be able to feel the passion and sincerity each inmate put into his or her respective story. During my interviews, I was impressed with the intelligence and sharpness of those incarcerated. I thought to myself, what a waste of brainpower and talent. I realized that so many of those African Americans locked up could have been successful on the outside if they made better decisions and had a different lifestyle. I was able to witness how remorseful some were for their crimes, and to see the psychological effects that prison life has had on them. Besides the time they have to endure, I also was able to see the pain and suffering they go through from being without their loved ones, families, and children. On the flip side of my feelings for them, I often thought about the violence they inflicted on others. Altogether, it was an emotional experience for me.

Each inmate put forth powerful words in his or her writings in an attempt to convince young people to stay in school, not to do drugs and abuse alcohol, and to listen to their parents. They also warned youth to watch out for that so called "friend". These written testimonials were character building for the inmates. It gave them a sense of worth and self confidence. They were proud of their work, and the messages they were sending to others on the other side of the wall. Several inmates indicated to me that their children would be proud of them for trying to help others stay out of prison. This feeling of doing something positive, in my opinion, increased their self esteem. Even though they were in prison, they felt that they had achieved a new height in their state of being. Although these individuals are incarcerated and were takers from society, I feel that they should be treated with basic dignity and respect.

If one does not know, the world of inmates is based on RESPECT!!! If for some reason chaos or violence is committed within the walls, most likely it was an issue associated with respect or the lack of it.

This book is only one creative effort to get the word out to our youth and their parents. One of the most alarming similarities in each of these essays is the impact of low or non-existent income and the lack of positive parental guidance. In some instances, inmates informed me that their parents were instigators in their lives of crime. Their parents were the role models for them making the wrong choices. Regardless of the circumstances, efforts must be made to break the cycle of crime, violence and the destruction of the African American family unit. Parents are losing children and children are losing parents to incarceration. Communities are also losing individuals who have the potential to be productive members of our society.

We all have to take responsibility for the choices we make in order to overcome negative circumstances. We maintain control of our fate and destiny by making the decisions we make. We must never let the fact that we are born into poverty, or the color of our skin, regulate our outcome.

The New Mexico Office of African American Affairs will distribute this book, free of charge, to youth, schools, churches, community

organizations and groups in an effort to bring about positive changes before the numbers increase in our correctional facilities. One person, one community or one state office will not be able to reverse this trend of high incarceration of African Americans in New Mexico and America. It will take a collective effort of partnerships with various agencies and groups to deal with this issue. Although this book was designed to meet the needs of African American youth and young adults, and presented from a Black perspective, I hope that others will read this publication. The words from the inmates have no color. They can apply to all races of people. These inspirational essays cross over color barriers. This book is for those who want it and in some cases, for those who need it.

I sincerely hope that "Messages to our Brothers and Sisters on the Other Side of the Wall" will be the beginning of other efforts to convince youth not to choose a life of crime. As they say, "crime does not pay."

Again, I would like to thank each and every one of the inmates who participated in this writing project. Without them, the New Mexico Office of African American Affairs could not have completed this book.

Respectfully,

Dr. Harold Bailey
Executive Director

SECTION I

LIFE BEHIND THE WALL

Big Solid Walls, Chain Link Fences and Razor Wire

Clint Brown

To most "street hustlers," I am known as "Sugah C. Slimm." I am a 38-year-old African American currently locked up in the New Mexico Department of Corrections. I have been here for the past 11 years, on the downhill stretch of a 26-year prison term for home invasion, armed robbery and drug trafficking.

In 1995, when I was found guilty and got on that big "blue bird" bus, handcuffed and shackled, on my way to the New Mexico Department of Corrections Diagnostic Center in Grants, New Mexico, I had no idea just what drastic changes were going to occur. I had nothing left. My family, friends, resources and my future had become non-existent. All I could see was my sentence of 26 years. Life beyond that looked pretty bleak, including the idea of life with my wife and kids.

By then, prison violence had become so intense that, even when you went to take a shower, you had to have someone standing outside the shower watching your back, and you'd best be showering with your boxers on, just in case someone decided to run in there wanting to stab you or something. Loners do not last in this environment. Here, there is no such thing as a loner. There are always convicts who will give you something in exchange for joining their gang or clique. You join a gang or clique either by choice or by force. Someone is going to test you the minute you hit the block, and it's usually the biggest guy on the compound. You constantly have other convicts trying to take your possessions, as well as, your manhood. I have two friends, one of them is doing 125 years and

the other one is doing 200 years, and they can't wait for a new boot to hit the yard, so they can have him wearing make-up and a halter-top.

My most dramatic experience in the New Mexico Department of Corrections was my first stop, at the Santa Fe prison, known as "the Main." The first day I arrived was the same day I left. After I walked down the corridor to the basement, where they hold new arrivals before they classify them and send them to the general population, I found I was assigned to a cell where a convict had just been murdered, two days prior to my arrival. I refused to enter the cell. A chalk outline of the body, crime scene tape and blood-splattered floors and walls were still visible, and a strong stench of death filled the air. On account of my refusal to be housed there, I was immediately transferred to the New Mexico "super-max" prison known as "the North."

In the North, I experienced cruel and unusual punishment no human being should suffer. I was locked in my cell 24 hours a day. If the correction officer in charge of my block that day liked me, I got to eat three times a day. In any case, I was allowed a shower once a week. I received no contact with my family and friends, which included no visits, no telephone calls and no mail. Every morning at 5:00 a.m., officers with the Emergency Response Team would come and strip me down to my boxers. Sometimes, they would take all my clothes, along with my sheets, blankets, mattress and pillow, and leave me exposed to freezing temperatures.

I endured this for a little over two years. Finally, I was transferred, back across the yard to the Main. It was only a few months of being back in the general population that a friend of mine was stabbed multiple times. He was cut

from his stomach to his chest. His chest was cut open so badly, you could actually see his heart pumping. I started vomiting, and was yelling and screaming for help. Incredibly, he survived. About two days later, six other convicts, including myself, were transferred from the Main, on account of rumors of a possible riot between the blacks and Hispanics—who do not get along well in New Mexico's prisons. Blacks in the New Mexico prison system are greatly outnumbered.

Upon my transfer, I arrived at the medium security prison in Las Cruces, New Mexico, known as "Southern." It did not take long for trouble to arise, given the high number of gang members and drug use. I was involved in a physical altercation with another convict, who had stolen my radio. Two of his friends jumped me, and I ended up stabbing one of them with a pencil. He survived, and luckily I did not get caught, or, once again, I would have found myself in another lock-down situation.

Every morning for the past 11 and 1/2 years, I wake up asking myself if I die today, would anybody know. Would anybody even care? I could go on and on about my life experiences of 11 years in the New Mexico Department of Corrections, but it all boils down to the fact that life in prison is not the life for anybody. It is a constant struggle for survival. It takes you away from your friends and family, those you love the most. It takes away your freedom.

Invisible Punishment of Black Americans

Russell Todd Schells

I just want to say something about what the United States of America has in store for blacks. If you looked at the news, you saw how this country let all those black people die in Louisiana. They fixed the Superdome, but all those people still don't have any homes, no place to stay. We have to think about it. I am saying these things from having lived them. I have spent 13 years incarcerated.

The incarceration rate for uneducated, unskilled young black men and women is dramatically higher than for others. In the early stages of the prison "boom," a significant percentage of young black male high-school dropouts were behind bars. By 1999, the incarceration rate had soared, black men having a much greater likelihood than whites of ending up in prison or jail.

It would trivialize slavery to equate it to today's situation. However, given this nation's racial history, it cannot be denied that a black child's sense of victimization will not be easily overcome as long as, for example, the government requires black children to carry ID cards to avoid being searched by the police. That is, imagine that you are 17 years old, standing outside of your school during a break from class, talking to friends, laughing, playing and/or just relaxing. Imagine that, for no reason, police squad cars pull up, and police officers come out shouting at you, guns drawn. You are thrown up against the wall, elbowed in the back, legs kicked apart, and violently searched. Your books are strewn on the ground. You ask what's going on, but are told to "shut the f—k up" or you will be

taken "downtown." When it finally ends, the officers leave, with no apology, no explanation. You are left to fix your clothes, pick up your books and gather your pride. Imagine that this is not the first time this has happened to you. It happens routinely, in random police searches if a crime occurs in your neighborhood, about which you might have heard some rumor. You hear the police are looking for information. You see the police, the ones who searched you yesterday, talking to other people about the recent crime. What should you do?

The public perception of unfairness and ineffectiveness in the criminal justice system is, unfortunately, based on fact. The harsh realities of race and class disparities at every step in the process, for victims and defendants, the under-funding of many criminal justice functions and the socioeconomic factors that influence case outcomes are all problems that have plagued the system for some time. The movement to mass incarceration has intensified these problems in the fundamental structure and functioning of the criminal justice system. Assembly-line justice, facilitated by powerful prosecutors, helpless defense attorneys and increasingly powerless judges, now characterizes the system, which determines whether or not a person will lose his or her liberty or life.

While this country can feed other countries or go to war, what is it doing for the welfare of our own people? The United States seems to have a "love affair" with incarceration, one that is unparalleled. In the United States, the incarceration rate is the highest. So, despite the wide reach of the U.S. news media and the influence on the culture of many areas of the world, its mass incarceration is not a model for the rest of the world.

I pray that no young black ends up with an ID card in the Department of Corrections. I have 11 children, and none of them has been incarcerated—only by the will of God. So, I urge young people to stay in school and go to college and get a degree. That is one of the ways to break this chain and make life better for some other black American.

Children of the Future

Michael Johnson

I am a 30-year-old black male doing a sentence of 12 years in the New Mexico Department of Corrections. I have been incarcerated since May 2003, and won't get out of prison until at least 2009. I haven't personally experienced all the race wars and intense prison riots, but I have had the experience of losing my freedom.

There is nothing pleasant about having to share all of what used to be your own personal space with 375 other inmates, and with no idea what they're in for. In the beginning of my incarceration, I could only sleep two or three hours a night, worrying if I would have to defend my life that day. While I got over my fear of the dark when I was a kid, prison was a brand new place, where I never knew what was lurking in the shadows or who would be waiting to carry out a personal vendetta against me. I have to take showers with other guys, up to eight people.—However anybody else feels about that, I know I would rather be in the comfort of my own home.–The lights come on at 4:30 every morning. We have chow calls (meals) at 4:30 a.m., 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. If you miss your call, you don't get to eat, unless you happen to have Ramen noodle packages or other personal food, which you can order once a week from Canteen. The jobs we work here only pay 30¢ an hour, so you will be lucky to make $10.00 a month, after taxes. And, if you have any family left, they might not be able to send you money.

As for personal freedom, no matter how grown up you think you are, there is always someone to tell you what to do. The guards might be there to do a job,

but that doesn't necessarily mean it's for your benefit. If they don't like you, or if they are just having a bad day, it's nothing for them to take it out on you. And, there's really nothing you can do about it. Whatever they say, there will be an officer with rank that will back their stories. For example, since I'm here for drug trafficking, every time something "drug-related" happens on the compound, I am deemed a "person of interest." It's called "profiling."

Your most basic needs may or may not be met. The motto here is "hurry up and wait," meaning, if you need to get something done, relating to legal, medical or dental needs, for example, or just need to talk to your caseworker, you will have to wait until the prison administration is ready to allow it.

Last, but not least, there is your family relationship. When I fell, everything fell with me. I had all the cool rides, with rims, sound systems, televisions, DVDs and tinted windows. I had just gotten married to a beautiful woman. We had two of the most precious kids. I was buying our first home, three bedrooms, which I had fully furnished with all new furniture. We had big screen televisions and everything else my family would ever want or need. Still, I wasn't satisfied. I felt like I didn't do enough. I started to stay out in the streets more than I was at home. The whole time, I never realized it was creating a space between my family and me. Within the first year in prison, I lost everything, my wife, our house, half of the things inside, and my dignity. I even lost about 40 pounds, due to the stress it caused me. Twelve years seems like forever. And, when you are the sole provider for your family and your hands are tied, it can drive you insane.

I'm too ashamed to ask anyone on the streets for money, because they have bills to pay and kids to feed. I feel useless, because I feel I am dead to the world. Now, I'm lucky to receive a letter in here. I'm lucky if I see my kids once a year.

The State owns me for another four-and-a-half years. But, I have faith in young people, who are the future, the next generation. I have children, beautiful, brilliant children, out there right now with a void in their lives. Still, they have a chance to make that better tomorrow for themselves, for all of us. I speak as a young man who's been there and is doing that.

Old School

Ronald Archie

Think about living life in a cage. You have no type of freedom, not even the freedom of movement. The only thing to look forward to is chow call, and that is only soy, turkey or chicken. You can't look at it or you won't eat it. If you are lucky, you will get one hour a day outside in the air. And, the air carries the smell of chain link and razor wire.

If something happens to your mom or dad, you can't be there. You can't help. You're in prison. You don't have the right to help them. You can only call them one time a week. If you're real lucky, you might get a visit where you can sit down with your family. From behind these bars, I've watched my family die off. My brothers and my sisters have all gone these last years. But the hurt never goes away, the pain of not being there for my mom as she laid my siblings to rest.

In the last 15 years of life, I can't see anything in this world that is worth more than my family. No money, no drugs, nothing. Family is all you have in this world, and all that stops at the prison walls.

Judgment Day

Lester Linton

I had been sitting in county jail for two days, waiting for sentencing on a second-degree murder and armed robbery, not knowing what was going to happen. The day before, my lawyer had come to me with a plea offer of 26 years. I'd already done two years in county jail, which left me 24 years, of which I'd only have to do 50%. That left me 12 years. I signed the plea, but it was still up to the judge to say yes. The next day, which I call "Judgment Day," the D.A. talked to the judge, told him I had signed a plea. The judge accepted the deal, and everything went down like my attorney and I wanted.

It didn't take long for me to get shipped to prison. It was 2002, March 21st. On my way to prison, I thought about everything I'd done and the time I had to do. I was hoping my so-called friends and family were going to keep in touch with me and help me out when needed. I was wondering if my girlfriend were going to ride or die.—Most of the time they die, because they can't handle being by themselves, especially if they're young.

So, I came to the Lea County Correctional Facility in Hobbs and got to know everybody, pretty much just trying to see what was going on around me. All I knew is this is where I was going to spend my time. I'd better get used to it, quick. I got a job working in Prison Industry, making clothes.

It was late December 2002. I was busy working, and all of a sudden, my left arm and left foot went numb. I knew something was wrong at that point. After I came back from work, I went to the infirmary, and I told them what was

going on. They told me I may have pulled a muscle, and let me go back to my "house." When I got back to my house, I fell down. They came and got me and took me to the real hospital. I had a tumor. I went through surgery, where they removed some of the tumor, and then I went through a 28-day treatment for the remaining tumor.

In February 2003, after spending a month and a half in the hospital, the only people who came to see me were my mom and dad. That's no surprise. Mom and dad are going to be the only people who will be there for you—no friends, no girlfriends. Months went by, and I came out of the hospital. They shipped me to another prison, in Los Lunas, because it was closer to the Albuquerque Hospital.

The years began to go by for me. I have been in Los Lunas for three years. It's now October 2006, and I've done six of my 12 years. During the process of recovering from my surgery, I lost my dad. That hurt me real bad. Because I'm locked up, I couldn't even go to my own father's funeral.

Coming to prison, you miss out on a lot of things. I came in at 22 years old. I am now 29 years old. I will do all my 20s inside, and when I get out, I will be 35 years old. When I finally do get out, I will be behind the times, because being locked up for so many years makes you that way.

When I have the chance to see the streets again, I will hopefully start a family. Still, I am one of the lucky ones. Sometimes you don't get a second chance, meaning, you could end up spending the rest of your life behind bars on your first crime. So, I tell young people, be careful how you choose your friends and think before you act, because it could be the last time you see freedom, and

you will be mad at the world. One thing is sure, nobody should spend any part of his or her life in prison.

Imagine This

Justin Naylor

Imagine for a moment there is a place where you do not make your own decisions. Someone else does. Imagine a place where you are told when to get up, what to eat and when to take a shower, when you can wash your clothes and when you cannot. Everyday in this place, you are told to line up, walk straight, turn around, put your hands behind your back, move over and be quiet. You cannot decide what to wear. In this place, your clothes are the same color and type, every day. There is a place where this happens, where making these decisions is stripped away from you.

Imagine, too, a place where you do not have your family and friends around. You are all alone. It is a place where you cannot eat dinner with your family or go to the park with your friends. Imagine waking up on a weekend and wanting to go out for some donuts and coffee or waffles and fried eggs. You cannot.

I am currently living in the place where I have no freedom, no freedom to make such choices for myself, where I make few of my own decisions. The place I am talking about is prison.

Convicted

Mike Protextor

I grew up in California, in a family that had very few resources. My dad was in the Navy, which kept him away from home a lot. My mom was really the provider for the household, though my dad sent home a small amount of money. I have five older brothers and two sisters. My brothers served as my role models.

I had multiple problems in school. By the time I got to the sixth grade, the school system had had enough of me. I became so frustrated, I dropped out of school in the tenth grade. I began gang-banging, stealing and partying. I was involved in the fast life, an easier way of life. I caught my first case at the age of 18 years old, charged with burglary and false imprisonment.

The court deemed it more beneficial to have me placed in a program operated by the H.O.W. Foundation. I was put out of the program, though, after only six months. I hid out for about two weeks, and hired a lawyer to try to keep me out of the jailhouse. In the meantime, I joined something called Victory Outreach and stayed there awaiting the court's decision. I was given probation of one year and successfully completed it.

I stayed out of trouble for about two more years. What I thought were small things, like traffic violations, however, began to pile up. I would be driving and get pulled over for dim headlights or defective items on my vehicle. I began using drugs, and, eventually, selling drugs. Soon I had a bench warrant for the traffic violations, which led to a charge of battery on a police officer and driving

without a license. This was the basis for my conviction, for which I was sentenced to five and half years. I am now incarcerated at Lea County Correctional Facility.

In prison, you go to bed when the COs (correctional officers) tell you. You get up when they tell you. You eat when they tell you. The correctional officers often make it hard for an inmate. They find reasons to set you off, especially when there are a crowd of other COs around and some of them want to impress the others. The officers seem to feel they are there to re-sentence inmates.—It would have been better to have followed the instructions of people who cared about me than to have ended up incarcerated and having to follow the instructions of these correctional officers. I should have learned how to be a smart soldier, to be my own person and stay free.

SECTION II

STREET LIFE

My Life as a Drug Dealer

Darlene Brooks

I was only 12 years old when I figured out about the street life. I grew up in a rough neighborhood, where there was drug dealing, drug addicts and gang-bangers. The gang I became part of was the Bloods. I was "jumped" in when I was 16 or 17 years old.

Once I became a Blood, I dropped out of school. I slept all day and partied all night. I was really living it up, I thought. This "new" life of mine was fun, exciting and full of thrills. In the end, though, the joke was on me.

Drugs soon became an important aspect of my life. I needed crack, just as much as any crack addict I'd ever met. Crack took precedence over everything in my life. That is, crack bought my clothes and every other thing I wanted or needed. So, I was "slingin'" dope and living it up because I wanted nice clothes, a nice car and all of the "in" things a lot of the homies had. The money was good!

By the age of 19, I was so far gone in my addiction to selling crack and gang-banging I could see nothing else. Soon, though, I discovered I was pregnant. During some night of partying, a homeboy and I took things a little too far. What was I going to do?

Nine months flew by, and before I knew it, I was a mother to a beautiful baby girl. I was scared, though. I was now 20 years old, with no education, no job or job training, and a baby I had to raise. I had to get my mind right and start thinking about my child's best interests. This meant I had to step up and be a

mother to my child. I had to put my gang-bangin' down and become a responsible parent. I had to figure out how to do that.

I started going to school at T.V.I. for my G.E.D. I was still selling crack, though, figuring, "Hey, one step at a time." I wound up getting locked up for six months, and had to leave my eight-month-old daughter. Four months later, my family bonded me out of jail, on a $20,000 bond. By this time, my daughter had had her first birthday, and she was walking. I had missed those two important events in her young life. Shortly after, I was sentenced to 18 months' probation. Still, I continued to sell drugs. I needed things, and so did my daughter. I felt I had no other options. Selling drugs was all I knew.

It didn't take long for me to get caught again. This time, I was placed in jail on drug charges. Now there would be another three months I'd be out of my daughter's life. I was given four years of Drug Court. I started making goals for myself, and was doing pretty well, except that I was still selling drugs. This addiction to selling drugs landed me here, for a term of 18 months.

My child is again without me. She is now five years old and in kindergarten. I have kept the goals I had previously made, and I am continuing to work toward my G.E.D. I am working so hard in here because when I get out I want to follow my dreams and goals. I want to become a fashion designer for plus-size women.

This time I have done in prison has made me realize that there isn't anything worth being without my daughter and without my freedom. Upon my release, I plan not only on following my dreams and goals but also on becoming a better mother to my daughter. I want to give her the life I never knew.

Second Chances in Life

William "Cisco" Riley

I am a 34-year-old father of two beautiful daughters, six and three years old, and am serving a life sentence in prison for first-degree murder.

I came to New Mexico from Los Angeles, California, with my pregnant girlfriend and three-year-old daughter. I had gone to high school in Long Beach—with Snoop Dogg and Warren Gee, with whom I remain very close friends. In 2003, I met some individuals in Clovis, New Mexico, working on some rap songs in a studio. We came together to create a compilation album to market. While recording the music, I got really cool with an individual named Sam L., who was also from Long Beach. I would take him out of town, to Lubbock or Amarillo, Texas, to party with some friends I knew. When his girlfriend would kick him out of the house, I would let him spend the night in our extra room, where we played X-Box.

My baby's mother is E., and her grandmother owned a day care school, which my daughter attended. In July of 2003, E. gave birth to our younger daughter. In February 2004, I moved into my own apartment, though, because she and I had had a major argument. My apartment was only five houses away from the day care school, which both my kids now attended. Everything seemed to be okay.—I had a Cutlass with a European front grill, sitting on 20-inch, chrome Dayton rims, a television with surround-sound, a 1997 Caprice with the L.T. motor, a fully-furnished apartment with a big, flat-screen television and a

system for DVD movies or X-Box games. I loved to play the X-Box while I smoked a flat blunt of weed.

At some point, Sam L. and I stopped being close friends. He had become a loud mouth and troublemaker. He was always getting into confrontations with gangs in Clovis, running back to me for help, putting my kids and me in danger. So I became distant from him, staying by myself or spending time with my kids, or, sometimes, dating single ladies in Clovis. And, I was hustling in the streets for the fast money.

Once I returned to New Mexico, Sam L. and I really had a falling out, because I wouldn't take care of him the way I used to do, wouldn't help him stash money in the game. He became angry because we weren't homies anymore. He started hating on me. One day, I went to visit my kids at the day care, and he was waiting on me. The shit hit the fan. We began to argue heatedly. I walked away, but he followed me home on foot. His new friend trailed him in a car. They pursued me all the way to my house. Once we arrived at my apartment, we started arguing again. His friend jumped out of the car. I was thinking they were going to do great bodily harm to me. I kept asking them to leave. They would not. I was going to get my gun if they intended jumping me. His friend said, "go ahead," he had a gun too. So, I went into the house to get my weapon. When I came out, they were in the car. I thought they were going to leave. Then, Sam pulled out a handgun from the console of the car. He and his friend started tussling over the weapon, and I fired out of fear. The driver got the weapon from Sam, and I ran to the passenger side of the car, where Sam was. The driver fired at me. Sam was struck three times. I was charged with his murder.

At my trial, the medical examiner testified that the shots that killed Sam were consistent with those fired from the driver's location. Still, an all-white jury found me guilty for his death. Now, I'm waiting on appeals to overturn the verdict.

The time I've spent in prison has been eye opening. Prison is a waste of time, full of lonely days and a constant barrage of negative situations. If the Lord blesses me with a second chance, I will use my experience to help and counsel others to stay out of prison.

Breaking the Chain

Chauncey Stokeling

I was born in the Southeast. My family moved to the Northeast with the hope of making a better life for their children. It would be better in the North without the pervasiveness of racism. My father was a good provider for our family, though he never spent any time with my brother or myself. And, he was an alcoholic, who ended up dying from alcoholism. My mother drank alcohol too, though only occasionally. Both of them, though, were so wrapped up in their party lifestyle, they couldn't see what it was doing to their children.

The good times were few and far between. Violence became normal in my childhood household. Fights between my father and mother came to be expected by my sister and brother and me. By the time I was school-aged, maybe six or seven years old, my father had to spent a week in the hospital because my mother had stabbed him with a butcher knife during one of their fights. It had happened in front of us. After a few more years of my mother's running around and my father's continued drunkenness, they got divorced. By this time, they both had been sneaking around with other people, and dragging us along when they did it. I suppose we children weren't supposed to understand.

My mother became very abusive toward us after her failed marriage, even though she had been herself abused. She took my sister and went back down South, leaving my brother and me with my father. Eventually, she sent for us. The culture shock of the South in the late Sixties combined with my mother's mood swings and her physical, verbal and emotional abuse left us physically,

emotionally and psychologically wounded. She would go from one emotional extreme to the next, alternating between tenderness and torture, joy and depravity. A good day was pleasant and uneventful—like a normal childhood. Bad days were like living in a minefield. You never knew if you would be able to navigate through the next hour or, even, minute without triggering some terrible consequence. For minor infractions, we were harshly punished or severely beaten. As we got older, we suffered worse beatings. They were no longer administered by belts but by electric extension cords, limbs from trees or whatever was close at hand whenever she became angry. Now we were being bound by our hands and feet when we were beaten.—Our cries and screams still haunt me.

Growing up and living with my mother and father, my sister developed an ulcer and I wet the bed. I understand now that we were under a lot of stress and strain, living in our own private hell. As we grew into teens, we all understood that we weren't safe living with our mother. We believed that sooner or later she would actually kill one of us in a drunken blackout. It was time to escape the danger of living with her. My sister had had to be hospitalized after my mother cut her wrist with a steak knife—and she doesn't have feeling in two of her fingers to this day. I spent three months in the hospital because my mother poured boiling water on me after I ran away, suffering second and third degree burns to the left side of my body. Eventually, all three of us left, one by one. We left either by choice or, as in the case of my brother, because of the justice system—having been charged with a crime after he had run away.

If there had been gangs where we lived, my brother and I would certainly have joined one. There were none. So, we drifted into a lifestyle of drugs and alcohol as an antidote to the pain we endured and the loneliness we felt. Anything that could stop the pain for a little while was tried. It only made things worse. I struggled through high school because of my marijuana use. I finally gave in to the drugs and alcohol and dropped out of school, halfway through my senior year. I did that in part because I didn't feel worthy of graduating. After all, I had been told most of my life that I was worthless and no good. I began to experiment with harder drugs, settling on cocaine. I was soon hooked, and came to be caught up in the crack epidemic of the late Eighties. My addiction became so bad, I left, moved to another state to try to escape it. I floated through life, incurring minor criminal offenses. In the meantime, I fathered two children. On account of my drug habit, though, I neglected them—even though I vowed to never hit them. Of course, I inflicted another type of abuse on them. I became my parents. I hated what I became.

I sit here in prison convicted of aggravated assault and aggravated battery of a household member, or, for domestic violence. I had truly followed in my parents' footsteps. I'm now taking classes in anger management, family dynamics and parenting, to try to stabilize my life and prepare myself for the time when I get out. I also attend 12-step group meetings to deal with my addiction. Finally, I have started college here and will be very close to having a two-year degree by the time I get released. It's taken all of this for me to realize I am not the worthless, no-good person I was told I was for so long.

The chain has to be broken. When I was a boy, I was told a story about a slave owner named Willie Lynch, who lived in the West Indies and had complete control of his slaves. The American slave owners wanted to know how he controlled his slaves. Willie's technique became known as the Willie Lynch Syndrome, and it has plagued generations of African Americans for hundreds of years. Lynch said that in order to control the slave, you had to pit the older male slave against the younger male slave and the younger against the older male slave; the female slave against the male slave and the male slave against the female slave; and, finally, the darker-skinned slave against the lighter-skinned slave. Distrust and envy had to be maintained among the slaves, so that they would only trust their white owners. Lynch taught that the slaves would follow this pattern for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years. Today, we see black kids killing others for jackets or tennis shoes, or wearing a certain color of bandana representing a gang, standing on the corner of a neighborhood they will never own.—We've been buying the lies when the truth is the complete opposite of what they have been telling us for hundreds of years.

As for me, I have developed a relationship with Jesus Christ. Now, I read my Bible regularly and I stand on one particular Scripture: Psalms 27:10, which says, "Even if my father and mother should desert me, then the Lord will take care of me." I believe God's love is unconditional and has the power to heal and set free.

When I Was Growing Up

Otha Lee Shamburger

When I was growing up, I lived in a rough part of Los Angeles, California, surrounded by gangs. What I noticed was that gang members had unity. They looked out for each other and did not let anyone pick on any of them. I wanted in on that kind of unity. I got curious and started hanging out with gang members. I had no father figure, and they became my family.

I did have a mother. She was a strong black woman who raised her three boys all on her own. She wasn't having that gang-banging nonsense. She put an end to that real quick, moving my brothers and me up north, to Oakland. It was a good idea, but a bad decision. Instead of gangs, I began hanging out with drug-dealers and pimps. I was a 13-year-old boy and still had no father figure. I was still looking for that sense of family, of unity. Some of the dealers and pimps showed me how the game worked. Some of them showed me how the game ends. Nobody told me about the consequences.

I became a young drug-dealer out there on the spot. I could no longer do the childhood things. I was always wanted by the law. On the run from the law, I saw things a 13-year-old kid should not have seen. I wanted to go home. I wanted to share my thoughts, feelings and reports of what I had seen with my mother. I couldn't, because I had become a wanted person.

My mother was the only woman in my life at that time, and I couldn't talk to her. She didn't know I was selling drugs. At least, I thought she didn't, though she certainly saw all the brand new things I brought into the house each and

every day. One day, she sat me down and said, "I knew what you were doing all along. I saw you out there on the corner selling that poison to people. Selling that poison will get you killed some day, or you will end up in prison somewhere."—Now, I am serving a 12-year sentence for drug trafficking in the state of New Mexico, 3,000 miles away from home. Now, I am 28 years old, finding out the hard way that prison is no joke.

Prison is crazy each and every day, a place where you have to live and shower with people you don't even know. People you think are your friends really are not your friends. They will lie to you, just to manipulate you into doing things you don't want to do. Now, I treat everyone as an acquaintance. I have no close friends here. I know my mother truly loves me. She is still the only woman there for me. She did not abandon me.—From here on out, there will be no more friends until I am released.

African American Inmate

Carlton Coleman

I never thought I could ever end up in prison. I am a devoted Christian, and I live my life serving the Lord. My parents are Muslim, and that was my religion until I was old enough to choose my own religious preference.

In May 1995, I was with a few so-called friends drinking and doing drugs. After so many days and nights of getting wasted, I lost the job I had at the time. Since none of us had a job or any more money, we had no way of supporting our drinking and drug habits. One night, while we were getting wasted, one of the guys came up with the bright idea of robbing a convenience store. Of course, we all agreed to do the robbery because we wanted to continue getting wasted. The initial idea was to rob one store. We ended up robbing several stores that evening. What I considered to be the impossible quickly became the possible. I was arrested and charged with several counts of armed robbery.

Still, I didn't realize how much trouble I was in until I awoke, sober, in a small jail cell the next morning. Soon, reality set in. I called my wife and kids to explain. I did my best to convince my wife that I didn't know the others were going to rob the stores. She wasn't buying any of my lies.—To make a long story short, I was convicted and sentenced to 27 years in prison. The judge suspended 16 of those years on the condition I didn't get into any more trouble. He also dismissed one of the robbery charges. All of this left me with a total of 12 miserable years to do. I stayed in prison until June of 2003, and was released on two years' parole and five years' probation.

Obviously, I'm back in prison, doing six years of my suspended sentence and 18 months for not complying with the parole conditions. Here I am, once again stuck in what is a living hell. I'll be here until 2008, and I do not like it one bit.

I ended up losing my wife because of this nonsense, and I grew apart from a lot of my other family members as well. I never thought about how much my being locked up would affect my loved ones. My kids feel as if their daddy has abandoned them; and it's slowly killing me to know they're feeling this way. They are growing up without their father. Whenever I have the opportunity to sit and visit with them, I thank God. But, they are growing up so fast, and I've missed any chance of being there while they grow. I am happily remarried now to a very beautiful and inspiring young lady. We have our problems dealing with my incarceration, but our love for one another has gotten us through these tough times. Prison has definitely taken its toll on me and my family.

I have been through the unthinkable while serving time. This has been the worse experience in my life, and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Once you become a state prisoner, you are labeled for life. Society no longer recognizes you as a "productive member." You instantly become a "nobody" to the world outside of these prison walls, and you are considered just a number inside these walls. In most cases, prison is a revolving door. So many inmates who get released, after spending more than half their lives in prison, return. So many become "institutionalized," meaning after staying in prison for so long, they don't know how to function outside these walls. Prison is all they know.

As for myself, I am trying to turn my time in prison into something positive for my future, while struggling every day. But, I accept prison for what it is, with the intent of doing my remaining time without any more problems than I already have.

Let's Shine

Eddie Hill

I was born in Amarillo, Texas, home of wheeling and dealing everything you can think of. Even though I haven't lived there in 20-odd years, I still know the ways of my country folks, and I can't forget about the things I used to do when I was younger.

The things I used to do back home in Texas when I was growing up was play games like "Tag," where the one who got tagged became the one who had to get the burden off his back. Now playing Tag is kind of funny because it relates to life in many ways. In life, we all begin to chase and compete with each other for the same things. I wanted to have the finest things in life, so I thought about ways to get the glamour life.

I went from being young and innocent, to selling drugs at the age of 13. The money I made from selling newspapers and boxes of candy did not satisfy my wants. I wanted new shoes, new bikes and new clothes, so I could be popular and make new friends at school.

When I was 16, though, my first child was born, and, by then, I had dropped out of school. The second child was born when I was 17. The third child was born when I was 19, and my fourth child was born when I was 22 years old. While I was making these babies, I was just a baby myself. So, somewhere along the way, I got hooked on drugs. Hard times came and went. Although the first time I was arrested, I was nine years old, in my 32 years of living, I have done 13 years of prison time. I have four more years to go.

From Compton to God's Grace

Brian Keith Johnson

About 40 yeas ago, when I was a nine-year-old boy, I remember being convinced of my right to long life, riches and honor. Soon though, being brought up in Compton, California, I became a Compton Crip. "Cripping" led me to drugs and alcohol. Drugs and alcohol led me to carrying handguns, car-jacking, robbery and drive-by shootings. You name it. If I didn't do it personally, I was a party to it. We "strolled" in gangs of 50 to 250 people deep at one time.—Today, most of these Crips are in correctional facilities, mental institutions or the graveyard. In this very year, 2006, one of them in California, who had been sentenced to death, was executed.

I've said all of this to point out how lost my life was before I received God's grace. Only God's grace has set me free, and led me to life—not simply being in a correctional facility. God has instructed us to "choose life." There are three steps I took to attain the wisdom of God. The first step was that I learned to fear the Lord. The second was to hear the Lord. The third was to humble myself before the Lord and do what He says.

Growing Too Fast

Barron Jones

My story isn't unique or even all that interesting. I am a 37-year-old African American male, who is currently a resident at the Western New Mexico correctional facility located in Grants, serving a seven-year sentence for shoplifting and commercial burglary. Some would probably think my sentence is severe. Since this was not my first offense, the state of New Mexico decided to play hardball.

The trouble that brought about my present incarceration began long before I attempted to deprive Sams Club of their merchandise. At 14 years old, I was introduced to alcohol by friends as a means to enhance the party, so to speak. I had fun. Soon, though, I was drinking to cope with pain and loss. In one year, I had lost my parents and my brother, under different circumstances and on separate occasions. With these losses, alcohol became a friend and comforter. I was a man, and the hurt I felt was for me and me alone. I drowned my sorrows in alcohol.

Soon, I moved to marijuana. I was going to school just to hook up with the homies to get high. Eventually, I dropped out of high school. I felt like a failure. After a time, I started using cocaine, and, when that could not provide comfort, I turned to heroin. In the absence of income, I began stealing to support my habit. This is what led to my serving so much time.

Disastrous Road

Timothy Burdex

Being incarcerated has impacted my life a great deal, and not for the best. It's been very hard on my family, too, with me in here. All the worrying and stress I have put on my family has been almost unbearable for them. So, it's not only me incarcerated. This prison is one of the most mournful places on earth. Anything is better than being an inmate. And, I would give anything to have never walked the disastrous road that led me here.

SECTION III

PRISONS OUTSIDE THE WALL

In My Mother's Footsteps

Sherna Samuels

This is dedicated to Marlena Addison, who loved me when I did not love myself, and to Degory Peoples, who learned to love me in spite of myself, and to Quay-john, my grandbaby and new love.

My name, Sherna, means "pretty and sweet." However, this only describes the outside of me. On the inside, I hide. I believe my mother made up my name by playing with various names. That's my mother, the player, the drinker and the reason I hide.

Living with my mother was horrible at times. I cried because of the abuse and pain I endured with her. I cried until my tears of pain turned into tears of fury. I did not know how to control all of the emotions I came to feel. As a little girl, I was always scared. Since I had no idea how to control my thoughts and emotions, anger erupted inside of me. I looked for things to destroy, and I destroyed anything, including anybody who stepped in my path, including myself.

Soon, I found solace in a gang called the Rollin' 40 CRIPs, though neither this gang nor any other gang meant anything to me, with their red and blue colors. It wasn't the gang that drove me to kill and destroy others' lives. It was the pain and confusion of my own life. I found myself abusing drugs and carrying out acts of self-mutilation. I felt a sense of calmness when I was intoxicated or hurting myself. As crazy as it may sound, it's the sad truth. It's my truth! When the drugs failed to calm my inner demons, I cut myself. I chopped at parts of my

body looking for relief—which I came to know could only be found in self-acceptance and understanding.

My acceptance and understanding didn't come, though, until I ended up with a 17-year prison sentence for two counts of armed robbery and aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, causing great bodily harm. It was during this time that I came to the realization I could no longer live this crazy life. I had to find a better way. To do this, I had to accept the facts of my life. I had to accept the fact that I had been sexually abused, and that it wasn't my fault. All of the blame went to the abuser. I learned, too, that the lack of love from my mother caused me to hurt those who attempted to love me. While I am my mother's child and may have a lot of her physical qualities, I do not have her ways. I have grown and matured and am now my own woman. Now, I have a few strong individuals in my life whom I call family and friends who have stood strong by me and who love me in spite of myself.

Even though I am happy to have gained some inner peace, I ask myself whether or not I am able to love as much as I hated. Am I capable of loving someone that much? Can I build just as I have destroyed? I still have no real sense of myself—for I have no experience of how to live without gangs and drugs. I am 35 years old now, and still most of my thoughts are morbid, twisted and rebellious. Now, though, when my thoughts begin to torment me, I take time to meditate. I take time to focus on the real issues, and weigh my options.

Constructing a woman once made of copper into a woman made of gold is not going to be an easy task. But, I will continue to transform myself, one day at

a time. I will become a woman not rich with money, but rich in happiness in life. I will learn to enjoy the simple things life has to offer, and I will cherish freedom.

Mixed Breed

Ritchie D. Simplicio

Even though I am only 42 years old, I feel fortunate to have lasted this long in life. In my various travels, I have come to know a lot of people, likable and unlikable, bringing success and failure, life and death. I don't remember all their names, but this is a brief recollection of my experiences in life's game of survival.

My prison sentence began when I was 29 years old. I had a wife and five children, a job and a future. In my life, though, I had encountered only ugliness, in the form of racism, alcoholism, drug addiction and distribution, gangs, violence, murder, suicide and abandonment. Ugliness consumed my life. But, I had to roll with all of it.

My first encounter with racism came from my own relatives. I am considered a "mixed breed." When I did well, I was one of them. When I didn't, I was someone else. As a teenager, I started traveling the country, where I saw and heard the hate people had for me because of my race. I soon began to label other people, just to make myself feel better. I tried to forget the names people called me by getting involved with liquor and drugs and associating with people who knew how to get respect from fear.

After graduating from high school and having a son, with another on the way, I joined the U.S. Navy. Unfortunately, I carried a lot of unwanted baggage with me. My marriage failed during this time. After I was discharged from the

service, I tried working, going to college, being a dad, a son, a brother and a friend. It just wasn't happening for me. I became angrier.

I wound up killing a man. It was self-defense. He not only called me "f—king _____," he attacked me physically. At that moment, it was going to be him or me. On October 8, 1993, I started a 16-year prison sentenced for second-degree murder.

When the judge sentenced me, he didn't tell me I was on my own and didn't tell me how to survive. And, there is no manual on "how to stay alive in prison." I didn't know what it meant to "take it to the yard," or what it felt like to see a person get killed for the color of his skin or because of the neighborhood he came from. I didn't know how painful it would be to lose members of my family while in prison, including my mother.

There are men here who glorify their stay in prison. There are some who recruit young men to follow them, offering a false sense of security, young men who don't know their commitment will be tested by bringing in drugs, even using their wives and mothers as mules (smugglers). These young men may not know that the shank (knife) given them is for use when called upon, often for use on someone they don't even know. Young men are doing time right now who have decided to bow down to another man.—I had to teach myself to become numb to these situations, and to remain thankful I was still alive.

The prison cultivates self-destruction, leading a person to even longer prison terms or premature death. But the future of our people rests on the shoulders of strong young men and women of color, who have opportunities yet to be revealed, talents that should be polished to shine, the potential to excel

beyond expectations. No matter the color of our skin or the texture of our hair, we are all in the fight for survival together. I'm a Native American man who knows the truths of the problems blacks face, because they are similar to the ones Native children are experiencing. From the ghettos of the inner city to the ghettos of the reservation, we are all in this struggle together.

Destroyed Dreams

Natalie Thrasher

Looking back, I can link my incarceration to the decision I made as a teenager to experiment with drugs. Drugs became more important to me than anything or anyone else. On February 22, 2006, I was convicted of drug trafficking, possession with intent to distribute crack cocaine, and sentenced, at 25 years old, to 18 years in prison.

Drugs had been in and out of my life over the previous 13 years. It started when my mother brought drugs into our home, when I was around 10 years old. I used to watch her and her friends using drugs. Before I knew it, I had crack cocaine in my own hands. I did not really do too much at first, and I stayed in school for a while. As I got older, I became addicted. Before I knew it, I lost my virginity, at 12 years old. I began living in friends' houses and, sometimes even, in strangers' houses or motels. I lost track of my mom.

Still, I felt I had everything I wanted. I could go to the mall or any store and buy what I wanted, when I wanted. Soon, though, I caught my first juvenile case, for a couple of "rocks" (crack cocaine). My mother caught the same case. A month or so later, I caught another case, that was, fortunately, dismissed.

I dropped out of high school in the ninth grade, at 15 years old. I was living in my mom's house with my boyfriend. But she soon put us out, mostly because I would not give her what she wanted, which was for me to assume the parent role. My brother and sister were locked up in a juvenile facility at the

time. So, I left my mom's, and I never went back. I had never gotten too much respect or help from her, but it didn't seem to matter anymore.

I got a driver's license, and bought a car. At 17, I caught another drug case, and, around the same time, on June 4, 1998, I gave birth to a little girl. My mother was on her way to prison. As for my case, I got a year's probation. Now, though, I had to take care of my daughter by myself, because her dad would not help me.

When my daughter was five months old, I became pregnant again. I had an abortion, because I knew I could not handle taking care of two kids by myself. After that, I started using birth control, because I had started messing around with a new guy—who, I later found out, had been sleeping with my own mother. Around that time, I was arrested for violating my probation, and did 23 days. When I got out of jail, this guy was gone, running around the United States. When he finally came back to Albuquerque, we went at it again. We moved into a condominium together and got married. That's when I caught my first drug case as an adult.

Before I knew it, there was a $50,000 warrant out for my arrest, for possession of crack cocaine. I ran around "wanted" for about a month. Finally, I got caught. At my arraignment, my bond was dropped from $50,000 to $5,000, which I paid and went home. My boyfriend and I got an apartment and survived for a few months, during which time my daughter had her second birthday. Not much later, my mother got out of prison and came home.

In the middle of 2000, I caught a second case. One of my husband's friends decided he wanted to turn us in, to save himself. When the police came to

our home, they found $2,000, some drugs and a very big gun. My husband and I went to jail; however, since he was under-age, he went to a different place. After I bonded out on this second case, I moved in with my mother, though not long after that, I got my own apartment. In November 2003, I caught yet another drug case, and I pled guilty in exchange for five years' probation.

I slowed down, and started going to school and being a mother to my child. My husband was locked up for 13 months, and got out in February 2002. I stayed in school and out of trouble for two years. All I did was spend time with my daughter and my step children.—they were the children of my new man. He was in a federal prison on a drug conviction. On June 10, 2003, I married him in the federal prison in El Paso, Texas. By October 2003, though, I caught another case, in Socorro County. When I bonded out and went home, my probation officer locked me up for four months. Those charges were dropped, though. Three weeks later, my new husband was released from the Federal prison, though, months later, he was right back in jail.

In 2004, I met a guy who gave me everything I wanted materially, and our affair went on for a while. I got a very good job and started taking control of my life—though I was still involved with drugs. I managed to keep my job for about nine months. Not long after I turned 24, on March 17, 2005, I found myself in jail—with my mother. The police had raided my home. My daughter had been there. Bonded out once again, I went on the run for 56 days, my daughter being taken care of by my grandfather. When I was finally caught, I stayed in jail a little over a month. When I got out, I was put on six-months' Intense Supervised Probation. It was during this time that I went to trial for drug trafficking. My life

was falling apart, and I could not stop crying. My daughter noticed it. Convicted, I thought about running again. But, I could not continue to hurt my daughter or myself anymore. I surrendered, to serve my sentence of 18 years.—Right now, I am appealing my case in the Court of Appeals. That and my faith in God give me the hope that someday life will be better for my daughter and me.

Regrets and Lost Love

James Elliott

I was active in sports from the age of four all the way up through my senior year in high school. I was very competitive and expected to win at everything I did—and God had blessed me with a talent for any sport. I remember being an all-star in soccer, basketball and baseball. I remember having dreams of becoming a pro-athlete, of playing world-cup soccer. I was self-disciplined and practiced soccer on a daily basis. This dedication paid off, because, by the age of 10, I was considered one of the elite. I played in soccer tournaments throughout New Mexico and Texas. My team and I were very successful, always placing within the top three in every tournament.

When I turned 13, while my focus remained on soccer, I found new friends and new interests. I began splitting my time between soccer practice and my new friends. They were the partying types, and seemed so cool and in control of their lives. I started drinking with them, and was soon introduced to marijuana.

During one summer, my new friends and I decided to steal some competition dirt bikes. We were caught by the police, and charged with theft. I was the only one convicted, though, because my so-called friends told the court I was the one who had stolen the motorcycles. I was offered a choice of either staying in Carlsbad, New Mexico, going to jail for two years, or, as the court suggested, moving to Washington to live with my biological father. Though I barely knew him, I moved to his house in Washington State. I had to quit playing

soccer and get a job. I hated my life so much, I started using alcohol and marijuana on a daily basis.

Eventually, I moved back to Carlsbad. Instead of pursuing my soccer goals, I continued using alcohol and marijuana, and I dropped out of high school—though I needed only two credits to graduate. I started working, and moved out of my parents' home.

Then, I met my now ex-wife. She was the most loyal and loving person who had ever been in my life. We got married, and I started selling cars at her father's dealership. For the first time since I was 13, I felt free inside. Her father was a very successful businessman, and he had high expectations for me. He and I spent more time together than she and I did —which turned out to be a big blow to our marriage. She needed and deserved more attention from me.

I was dedicated to the car business, though. Before long, I was spending seven days a week working 12 to 14 hours a day. Soon, I opened my own auto detail shop. Now I worked all day and, after work, went to my detail shop to take care of whatever work needed to be completed there. I was getting two to four hours of sleep a night. It just wasn't enough.

Out of the blue one day, someone introduced me to methamphetamine. It was something that would give me the pick-up I needed to keep up with my busy schedule. I started using meth and drinking every day. All was well, though. I was making $70,000 a year at the age of 21, and my income was increasing every year—until I was about 25 years old. That was when all the lost sleep, the stress from my wife, the demands I had put on myself to be successful and rich caught

up with me. My substantial savings would allow me to take a month or two off from work, which I felt would do my marriage and me some good.

During that time off from work, my addiction to meth and alcohol intensified. I thought it would all be okay, though, believing once I started back to work I wouldn't have enough time to use meth and drink. A month turned into two months, and two, into six months. Six months became a year. I was almost out of money, and knew it was time to go back to work. I took a job selling cars again. The only problem was I didn't have the same motivation I had had when I was 20. I wanted to get high, and work didn't matter anymore. My addiction grew stronger. I was forced to file bankruptcy. I got a divorce.

By this time, I was 28 years old. I hated my life. All I wanted was to do more meth and get drunk. That's all I cared about. I'm now 33 years old, and I've been sitting here in prison for two years.

In the Eyes of a Half-Breed

Davon Lymon

Here in the penitentiary, it is a little more difficult than on the street being as I am black, white and Puerto Rican. Here, I have to worry about a Brother thinking I am not good enough because I am not completely black. And, nobody else wants to get close to me. It's hard having to look over your shoulder all the time. Because I am a half-breed, I am a target. No one will retaliate if something happens to me. But, I really don't mind. I came in by myself, and I will leave by myself.

Being in this concrete jungle is none of the things it's all cracked up to be. My whole life, all I have done is gang-bang and "slang" dope. I have two beautiful children, a little girl and a little boy, whom I have only been able to watch grow up from inside these prison walls. My daughter is becoming very curious about why daddy can't come home, or why daddy cannot leave with her when she comes up to see me. My son is starting to misbehave because he does not have a father figure to teach him how to be a man.

Because I am here, I have actually lost my wife and children. Worse, they have to do my time, mostly because of the mistreatment to which they are subjected by the corrections officers on visits. My now ex-wife has tried to be nice to the officers when she comes up to see me. No matter what, there is always a stupid officer who decides to give her a hard time, or worse, tries to flirt with her, or get at her so he'll have something to talk about later with the other officers. She should not have to put up with this s---. She's not doing the time. I

am. She doesn't have to endure this, but she does. It really gets tiresome, though, to hear about what the officers are doing to her and my kids, and it is difficult being powerless to do anything about it except tell my ex-wife and kids not to come anymore. On the other hand, it would be the hardest thing in the world not to see my shorties anymore, and because I could not protect them.

I walk around the compound with my head held high, though, because I have that prison mentality that, as soon as someone decides to test me, it's time to catch a square—meaning, to pick a spot and get down. Ain't no room for talking. For me, I have to worry about everyone testing me, trying to see where I fit in. But, I don't fit in with anyone. It's just survival of the fittest.

In prison, you are divided into groups. You have the whites, the blacks and the Hispanics with Mexicans. You have your gang members and your prison gangs. The prison gangs are different from the street gangs in that they might want you to go so far as to kill someone, someone you grew up with, someone from your own hood. But, I don't have a problem getting along with all races, because everyone bleeds just like me. But, I'm nobody's lap dog. I am my own man.

As soon as you come into the prison and get your room, before you have a chance to put your stuff down and make your bed, you will be confronted by convicts. They want to see what you are made of. Me, as soon as I came into my room, I was fighting. Everyone was waiting to see if I would fight or back down. Here, you are either a predator or prey. I stayed fighting for about three days in the beginning, because everyone thought I would be a pushover because, at 6'4", I only weigh 135 pounds.

I have always had a temper, and it has gotten me into a lot of trouble in the penitentiary because I won't back down, not from anyone, including officers. The officers are the biggest gang in the penitentiary. If you mess with one, they will all get you. They will not just put you in handcuffs, they will take you where there is no camera and beat the hell out of you. If someone comes to visit you, they will tell your visitor that you refuse the visit, so that your wounds will heal and leave no evidence for your family to see that the officers have beaten you.

A lot of my so-called homies think coming to prison is cool because they think you can earn your stripes here. I tell them, if you come to prison, you lose all thoughts of earning stripes. You just try to stay alive.

Like Father, Like Daughter?

April Lacey

My story is like a lot of others who grew up the way I did. I'm 24 years old now, and finishing my first and what will be my last prison sentence. I have a five-year-old little boy whom I've only seen twice in the last three years. I'm hoping to change all that very soon.

I grew up in poverty in a single-parent home. I have six brothers and sisters, including two older stepsisters, one older stepbrother, two younger half-sisters and one younger half-brother. My father went to prison the year I was born, so he wasn't in my life at all when I was growing up. Sometimes, I would get letters and birthday cards from him, but that was the extent of our relationship. The father of my brothers and sisters left right after my baby sister was born, and I was about eight years old. After he left, we moved from a bad neighborhood to a worse one.

Now with my father being African American and my mom being Anglo, and considering that the father of my brothers and sisters is Anglo, I was the only one in the family who was biracial. I felt like an outsider. Though you could find every race in our neighborhood, I sought out other African Americans. I got something from hanging out with them that I couldn't get from my Anglo family. So, as I grew older, I stayed away from home as much as possible.

I learned about gangs when I was about nine. My older brothers and sisters were all in gangs. By the time I was 12, I was in a gang, too. I saw a lot of things a kid shouldn't see, though, by that time, I didn't feel like a kid. My mom

was never home, and when I wasn't taking care of my younger brother and sisters, I was running the streets like I was grown. I didn't really go to school, or if I went, it was to do something stupid, like rob the teacher or steal her car. My best friend and I were the youngest in our set, so we were always trying to prove ourselves.

I went to "juvy" the first time when I was 12. As soon as they shut the cell door behind me, my mom's words rang in my head: "You're just like your father. You're gonna end up just like him." When I got out of juvy four months later, things got worse. We had lost our house and were living in motels. I just stopped going home, period. I'd stay with homies or I'd rob somebody and get a motel room of my own, finding somebody over 18 to register for me. By this time, I was smoking weed and drinking daily. I lived like this for about two years.

My mom finally found me, when I was 13, and made me move with her and my younger siblings to New Mexico. My father was from there. I hated her for that. Her idea was to get me away from the city and gang life, so she moved us to a little town called Roswell. I rebelled and rebelled and rebelled.

My father was in prison in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Shortly after we moved to New Mexico, I visited him there, meeting him for the first time. It was awkward and uncomfortable. I didn't know what to say or do, and I could tell he was nervous, which only made me nervous. Our second visit wasn't quite as awkward. And, all the subsequent visits together grew gradually less difficult.

While I was getting to know my father, I was trying to know myself. Between 14 and 16, I struggled a lot with identity, like a lot of teens, of course. I had no moral support, and my role models were my mother, addicted to pills, and

my father, a big kingpin in the pen. Looking for an escape, I found drugs, alcohol and older men. During those two years, I was raped, kidnapped and arrested multiple times. I was traveling all over the United States, doing crazy things. Finally, I was arrested for one of those crazy things, for which I spent three years locked up in the New Mexico Girls' School.

When I got out, I was 19 years old. I met a man and got pregnant by him, thinking having a baby would settle me down. It did, for a while. Then, a so-called homie introduced me to "ice," also known as methamphetamine, or "meth." I was gone from there on. I left my son with my mom. From 2002 to 2004, I was in and out of jail, watching my life spin out of control. I knew where I was headed, but I didn't know how to stop. I was headed for prison or a coffin. As much as I hate this place, I thank God it was prison.

Time, I can never get back. I'll never see my son get on the bus his first day of kindergarten. I can't rewind my little sister's graduation or my baby sister's first date. When I get out and I go looking for a job, I will have to include my incarceration for armed robbery on every application, hoping they give me a chance.—How else will I be able to provide for a five-year-old little boy on my own?

Progressively Worse

Shawn Mayton

I was born and raised on the west side of Dallas, Texas. My mother and father separated when I was very young. I grew up under my dad's roof, and graduated from Del Valle High School. After graduation, I enlisted in the United States Navy, and eventually graduated from boot camp out of Great Lakes, Illinois. Immediately after that, I took two weeks' leave to visit family. During this time, I married my high school sweetheart right there in my hometown.

At 17 years old, I was married, in the military and on my way to catch my first ship. Stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, I had to leave my wife behind until I could get situated and send for her. Two months after arriving in Norfolk, though, we had found a small house. Within a year of being on my ship, I was in trouble for absenteeism—due to my drinking. My wife became upset with me. I avoided her. She left me while pregnant with our first baby. I began to feel the need to drink even more.

I ended up losing my career in the Navy due to my drinking. Discharged, I headed back to my hometown. I tried to find my wife. In the meantime, since I had to have a roof over my head, I ended up at my cousin's house. Although I found a job rather quickly, things got progressively worse. My cousin was using and dealing drugs. Soon, I was using drugs with him.

Now, I only felt good when I was high. I did not feel like I fit in unless I was around others who were high. Once, when we ran out of money, my cousin asked me if I would pawn some of his tools, since I had ID. After I pawned the

tools, we had enough money to buy some alcohol and drugs. However, the tools I had pawned for my cousin turned out to be stolen. There was nothing I could say to the detectives to make a difference. I ended up in jail. As my addiction became worse, I was arrested again, and again. Each time, I honestly thought I was in control. I did not think I had a problem.

Now, years later, I sit here in prison. Each time I have been in jail, the sentences have grown longer and longer. I often think about my family and all the love I have for them. Prison has kept me separated from them. This hurts the most. I used to think there was no way I would ever end up addicted to drugs or going to prison. It happened faster than I even realized.

Wading Through the Pain

JoAnn Mitchell

I am an African American woman who is 45 years old. I am the mother of seven children, three sons and four daughters, and the grandmother of three.

I was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My mother told me she and my father were divorced by the time I was two years old. The first time I met my father, though, I was seven. My mother died when she was only 30, which left my two brothers and myself alone to fend for ourselves. Eventually, we went to live with our maternal grandmother—where I never felt wanted.

When I look back over my life, the feeling of being abandoned was always there, even before my mother died. She was one of the reasons I felt left out, and timid and fearful. My mother suffered depression and was, herself, timid and fearful. Some folks said she was considered the "black sheep" of the family. I felt like a black sheep.

I started using drugs at 13 years old, marijuana and Valium. I tried drinking, but I didn't like the way it made me feel. While I stopped smoking marijuana, I used Valium to escape the pain I felt as a little girl afraid of the world. I needed something to alter my mind so I could accept life. One drug led to another, and using drugs became part of my life.

By the time I turned 24, I had become a crack addict. I was committing crimes to support this habit. I got caught up in so much darkness, life became even more unmanageable for me. Life had no meaning to me.

By the time I reached 32 years old, I had seven children. My family raised them. My children didn't really know me, and I didn't know them. I truly thought I was only hurting myself, though the guilt and pain from abandoning them weighed heavily on me. I no longer wanted to live. Death became a driving force. More and more, I just wanted to end it all. Drugs had become my master. I was doomed.

After living such a life, it's hard to understand how I made it through. After much stumbling and falling, I realized I could not live without Jesus. I dedicated my life and my heart solely to Him. As I have been forgiven, I forgive myself. I no longer want to die. I want to live, to live to become a better mother and a better person.

The Struggle of a Half-African-American Man

Johan Neaman

My struggles began at an early age. Growing up in Black Foot, Idaho, half-African-American and half-Native-American, was not easy for me. It was a poor environment on the reservation. Most people did not like me because of my skin color. People who did not know me degraded me, using some pretty messed-up names, everything imaginable. My sister told me to fight back, that if I did not fight back for being so degraded, she would beat me up. After a while, I started fighting those who called me names. I got expelled from school a few times for fighting.

During this time, my mother became a heavy drinker. My older brother and sister were already on their own, so only my younger sisters and I lived with her. They are mixed as well. I never knew my father, and this only made life more difficult for us to understand. Eventually, I had to play the father role for my younger sister and brother.

I started drinking, and soon ended up having to do time in a detention center. This led me to stealing cars. When I was 15 years old, I was finally caught. I was sent to the boys' penitentiary in Salt Lake City, Utah, where I did about three years. I had never experienced the racial problems such as went on in that place. It housed a big racial conflict, and you had to stick to your own kind. I did all my time alone. Before they let me out, I was told I had to leave the state. I moved to my mom's place in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Living in New Mexico, I began to feel lost. Eventually, I met an uncle who helped me, explained life in a way I could understand. He broke down the lifestyle of an African-American, which helped me to understand my people. The degrading names I was called as a young boy, those memories, echoed in my head. Now, I understood. This kept me in the streets, where I learned how to sell crack cocaine and how to make it. I started selling this drug to my own people, not realizing the consequences behind it.

During this time, I met the woman of my dreams. She told me she did not want me selling or doing that stuff. I told her I would never do that, but I did. Soon, I was arrested for selling drugs to an undercover police agent. I received a sentence of nine years, six of which were suspended, with three years on probation.

Back on the streets of Albuquerque, I started selling drugs again, and using them, as well. I started losing money, spending most of what I made to support my own, bad habit. One day, I was walking down the street and a man called me a name—because I would not sell him any dope. We started to fight. Instead of walking away, I beat him to death.

I had only three years' probation to do. Now, I am serving 15 years for second-degree murder.

SECTION IV

BORN AGAIN

Young, Black and Beautiful

Marcus Hill

I am a black man who is incarcerated here in Roswell Correctional Facility for committing a violent offense. I have served one year on a three-year sentence, and am ready to go home. Prisons have hurt me mentally, emotionally, financially and physically.

Although I am the proud father of eight children, six boys and two daughters, whom I speak with on the telephone three times a week and visit with once a month, I cannot provide for them. Being in prison has hurt my family and children a great deal. My children are getting poor grades in school because they're worrying about their dad, wondering if I am okay. I'm not able to be there to help them with their homework.

Prison should not be an option for anyone. Prison is not a fun place to be. In prison, the majority of your rights are stripped from you. You have to do what you are told to do, whether you like it or not. They tell you when to shower, when and what to eat, when to go to bed and what to wear. There are 350 inmates here, coming from every background—African Americans, Native Americans, whites, from 18 to 70 years old. They put all of us in the same living space, so you have to get along with everybody. If you don't, you have to fight, and you could get killed. If you hurt someone real bad, you will go to court and get more time added to your sentence. You have to constantly watch your back, not only from other inmates but also from the guards. People lose their lives in here for any reason, no reason. I have been in a lot of confrontations in here, though not life-

threatening. But, I could have let them escalate to the point where someone got hurt really bad, me or another inmate.

As a child, I was exposed to a lot of things I shouldn't have seen. At 13 years old, I started hanging out with the wrong crowd, selling drugs and not wanting to go to school. Around that time, I got arrested for selling drugs and was taken to the juvenile detention center.—Now that I am much older, I wish I could turn back the hands of time. I would have made wiser decisions.

Back in the 1930s and 1940s, African Americans were not allowed to go to public schools and obtain a decent education. A lot of people lost their lives so we can now go to school. After you turn 18, people don't care if you go to school or not. You are considered an adult. Without an education, you might be forced to turn to crime to get what you need and want. When and if you go out and commit a crime, prison will be waiting.

Each and every single night, I pray to God that He will grant me the courage, knowledge and power to change my life around while I am still young, for myself and for my family. I want to become very important to the black race, and mankind, and help our intelligent and beautiful black youth to use their minds to gain what God has planned for them. There is no future for African-American boys and girls behind prison walls.

Come on in with Me

Edward Edgerton

...So many souls inside my walls.
Some brag they have no fears.
But when alone inside their cells,
They find it hard to stop their tears.
Lie across my metal bed of gloom.
That's where I'll always be.
I'm the icy fingers of your despair.
Come on in with me.

I've started with a poem of mine to show the dark and dreadful life of incarceration. Prison is not a place to be. Cages are for animals, and that's exactly how you are treated here.

When my grandmother raised me for the greatest part of my life, she taught me morals and the meaning of the word "integrity." She talked about the importance of staying in school, asked me to make her proud.— now I can see the tears coming from her very grave. I stopped listening to her.

My mother was an alcoholic. She could not stop drinking, even while carrying me. She gave me away right after birth, though I was not legally adopted. I was passed through the hands of many families, though none had the resources to care for me. Finally, someone was interested. A. E. would soon be my legally adopted father.

A. and his wife kept me for one year in their home in Brooklyn, New York. Then I was abandoned again. My next home was with A. and his new girlfriend, until they broke up. He then sent me to his mother's house in North Carolina. This was the home of the grandmother who raised me after that.

My grandmother lived slightly below the poverty level. She and my aunt, who lived with her, were the ones that took in all the unwanted kids in the family. There were eight of us. We were always fighting for the last bit of food on the table. My aunt was mean, though. She ruled with an iron fist. She would beat us unmercifully, for almost anything. We had to pick our own switch from the backyard willow tree with which she could beat us. Along with fighting among siblings, her beatings served as my introduction to violence. She would tell us that she beat us because she loved us. This made me confused about love and what it meant. Love and anger seemed to go hand in hand.

My grandmother didn't have any formal education. My aunt had completed only the third grade. We could never go to them for help with problems we were having with schoolwork. Since we lived in a neighborhood riddled with crime, criminals were the only ones available to teach us.

Prisons are full of men and women for whom life never gave an opportunity to become productive members of society. Many of the men I have met in this prison have good hearts—though they have allowed their souls to die. Most of us grew up too fast. Many of us don't know what love is. Some of us were babies having babies, not knowing how to properly raise them, not knowing how to be fathers, since our own fathers were not around. Sex had often been the only thing that gave us pleasure in a world of poverty. We didn't expect it to cause us pain. We tried getting out of our worlds. The street told us we could get out, get rich by selling drugs or robbing banks or other people, and increase our self-esteem. Then we woke up in prison.

I write many poems for men imprisoned here. Their pain is real. They allow me to document their pain through poetry. I've written many stories about wasted lives. Prison is designed to keep us here, to keep our minds locked up.

Insights

Alphonso Alexander, Jr.

I've been to prison twice. I went for a few months when I was in Mississippi in 1996. I'm from Illinois, and I have been to California. Now, I'm doing time in New Mexico, since 2003.

I have seen a lot of illiteracy in inmates. I've seen the System eat them up. It's so sad to see that these men cannot assist their children or grandchildren with their homework or anything else. A lot of inmates who were not on prescription drugs before they came to prison are using them here. You see them walking around looking like zombies, acting crazy, with swollen bodies. They want to be doped up. Some inmates need these drugs. Those who do not need them, but who take them anyway, seem even more agitated, not at all at peace with themselves when they don't get the drugs. They all say missing their families is what's most hard to deal with.

Some inmates don't get a second chance at freedom. They mess up one time and spend the rest of their lives behind bars.—I met a 21-year-old who had been sentenced to 999 years! I met a gentleman on his way to Death Row.—You can't imagine what this does to them psychologically, and what it does to their families, emotionally, mentally and physically. Incarcerated men may have started something great out there in the world, including their families. Now, though, someone else has to pick up the pieces.—We are all just statistics now. I have been one, though I'm trying to change. It's sad I had to go this route.

When I was a little boy, I was molested by a female babysitter. I flunked out of the third grade, and the school system put me in a special education class. From grade school, through junior high and into high school, though, I was on the basketball, track and football teams, and was chosen captain of those teams. In fact, I was able to go to college on a basketball scholarship, with the prospect of becoming a professional athlete.—I played with a lot of guys who ended up in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Once, I played on a team with Will Perdue, who won three NBA titles with the Chicago Bulls.— But, in the 1970s, I joined a Chicago-based street gang called the Vice Lords. Then, I started using drugs and alcohol.

Still, I graduated from college, with a Bachelor's degree, and worked as a public aid worker, a teacher and a retail store manager. At the same time, I fathered seven children, with six different women. Tragically, though, I spent 16 years hooked on crack cocaine. This is why I am currently incarcerated. I believe it is only by the grace of God that all my children are doing well—one of whom is, ironically, a police officer.

New Mexico's Nightmare

Joshua May

Not merely a chip, but an unbearable weight was on my shoulders most of my life.

Hot, cold, hungry, lonely feelings and being isolated from the free world isn't living. Yet, sometimes, I've actually thought it's better than the life I was living on the streets. I'm sober now, and not hurting others or myself.

After I was released from prison the first time, in 1999, I had shaken the "crack monkey" off my back. It only came to be replaced by the "gorilla," heroin. I thought the birth of my first son would keep me straight and drug free. I was smart enough to know my son needed his daddy. But, my old habits remained. Now, after having had three chances to overcome those habits, I have to see my sons grow up only through pictures.

As a tri-racial, predominantly black, or African American, man, fitting in was or seemed to be harder than growing up in a "full" black family. In a family portrait of four generations, I am the only one out of the whole bunch who doesn't look like he belongs. I've never known my dad or his side of the family. I was raised Catholic in a Hispanic culture, with all my aunts, uncles, cousins. My mom is of Hispanic and German descent. In other words, I was the only "chocolate chip" in the cookie. This made me stick out. Then, living in New Mexico, where African Americans make up only one percent of the community, I stuck out even more. Being teased and made fun of about my racial identity only built up the chip on my shoulder.—I was expelled from two schools by the time I

was six years old. There's not a school year I can recall in which I didn't fight and get suspended over being called "the N word."

In prison, though, I had to decide on which side of the fence I belonged. Raised Hispanic but looking black is a situation. I've had many lonely, quiet nights to lie on my bunk and soul-search. I keep it real with myself and those around me, those who don't ask me to choose but accept me for me. I've been almost 10 years in the prison system. I'll be 30 years old when I get my fifth chance.—I'm very proud of the fact that in my lifetime I've been able to come to the realization that being a black man is a blessing.

More Than a Bag of Weed

Emmanuel Green

I'm from a very small town in New Mexico, from a single parent household. There were seven sisters and six brothers in our family, which made 14 of us children all together. I never had too much of anything, though my mother did what she could for us. I went out on my own at the age of 15, went all the way to Washington, and started working for a lady who had her own business. That lasted for a few years.

When I went into the Army is when things started going wrong in my life. I moved back to Silver City, New Mexico, and became involved with a woman who became my baby's mom.—Now, I look at my grandchildren and remember family and friends and all the good and bad times I had out in the free world.

Here, though, you are never at peace with yourself. Something is always jumping off. I have found myself standing alone just waiting for someone to run up to me with a weapon or something.

I think there's a lot more that black youth should have than just a can of beer or a bag of weed. But I don't have the knowledge to really put it down. I think we should stop the black-on-black hating and killing, come together as one unit and fight the fight our ancestors fought. It's terrible being locked up day after day, for years. And, once you cross over into this prison system, it's a lifetime thing, at least for some of us.

Life Can Always Be Different

Lafayette Gifford Lowe

Life on the streets of South Central L.A. could have been lived as a kid for some. There was another side of the street, though. That's where I lived, and where I saw money, cars, girls. The more I was around the older guys and men, the more I felt like one of the big boys. It was the 1970s, and a group that would come to be known as the Crips was starting to form. At eight or nine years old, I should have been playing and running around with kids my own age.—I'm still somewhat of a kid at heart.—But I kept seeing the money.

I started doing things that weren't kid-like: stealing, smoking, hanging with the older guys. School started to be irrelevant. By the age of 14, I had been picked up by the police at least 10 times. I thought that was cool—though the first person I called for help was Mom. By 16, I had my first body. I was doing things no kid should think about. All I could see were the money and things. I really had a lot of fun having all the goods that money could buy—cars and clothes and cash—and all the women I had. All of that was good until I realized I was in jail so much, I was losing more than I was gaining, calling collect from jail and getting no answers, crying out for "Mama," and getting no answer.—Now, I've been in three different prisons.

Almost all my life has been in the streets, in gangs and in prison. I have five daughters and two sons, and I thank God every day they haven't ended up like me. One thing you can't get back is time. My mom is older, my kids are

older, and I am alone, living in an 8' x 10' prison cell. This is not the life I thought I'd live when I was a kid.

Inmate 64104

Charles Santos

Prison was never part of my plan. I'm in my thirties now, but I've had a very cool life. I was in the U.S. military, I've been married, and I've attended a two-year college and a four-year university. I've met a few famous people, and have had the pleasure of learning from a few failed business ventures.—Now I'm here, living in a small city surrounded by fencing and barbed wire.

The dictionary defines prison as "a place where a person is confined." I can only compare it to being in a coffin. It's that lonely here. Life literally stops. In the two years I've been locked up, I've had no visitors and a few letters—all from family members. My experience here is not unique, though. Mostly everyone here is going through the same type of isolation. Maybe one out of 20 inmates actually has the full support of his family and friends.

When I was on the streets, all I needed was money, drugs and friends. Now, on any Saturday, I am bored. No matter how I try to entertain myself, nothing alleviates the boredom. In here, we call it loneliness. We are confined to small areas, though some unfortunate souls are confined to cells no bigger than six-feet-by-nine-feet. Every day, you do the same 100 things: play cards, talk with people, write letters that never get a reply, watch TV, eat, sleep, draw, call home, read and work out. Sometimes, you get inventive and figure out how to do these things 100 different ways—over and over again. After the first few months of being in prison, it feels like the same day—not Saturday.

My family was poor. Most of the influence I received from them was good, though some of it was bad. I've relatives who have been in prison. I've had relatives who have been killed on the streets, and some who have killed on the streets. Life was not easy for them. Members of my family who have been to prison hate prison. You can't get close to them with anything that might send them back down this road. The fear they possess is healthy. I used to wonder why my family didn't take an active, supportive role in my prison experience, by visiting me or sending me money, accepting my calls or sending me care packages. I figured it out. If I had been the first family member to have gone to prison, they would have been more supportive. My family even sees my imprisonment as a kind of "relief," relief that I'm not on the streets or laid out somewhere dead.

The only venture I wanted to get into on the streets was drug dealing. I allowed the lure of fast money from dealing drugs to have power over my life. It was easy for me to sell poison and then look at other people with contempt. I wasn't afraid to take "penitentiary chances." It all ended in prison, though. I thank Allah it did not end in death.

Daddy's Girl

Melinda Hedrick

I entered Grants Women's Correctional Facility in October 2003, two days after my 40th birthday. I traveled a long way to find myself. I've been striving all my life to find happiness.

I saw my father as an African-American man who worked hard and was always down for his family. He loved my mother like a queen. He was a man who treated us all like queens. My father ruled his world, his life and his family with great happiness and honor. My mother did everything that needed to be done, and gave herself nothing. She was a loving mother and wife. She used to say that the only thing that made her happy was loving my father. She did whatever he said to do, always, until the end. With my dad, her king, she died alone, many years after him.

This is my addiction, to be loved. Men say that you can't live with them and you can't live without them. I've been behind a man for years, and I can say I've had only one man I wasn't behind or in front of, but stood with side-by-side. This is the way I ended up in prison, behind a so-called man, my ex-husband. I took everything I saw my mother do and did it all, all in the name of love. Yet, this was a man who abused me in so many ways. Getting away from the pain he inflicted is how I ended up here in prison.

Here, I found the woman I was and needed to be. I know now that I don't need to look for my king, because he will always be in me. My father can never be replaced.

SECTION V

NO MORE FAMILY. NO MORE FRIENDS

Good Times

Cerlupp Henderson

I remember good times in my life. My mom would help me make my bed or she'd rock me to sleep. Thinking of these times brings a smile to my face and warmth to my heart. For every good memory I have, though, there are three or four bad ones. I grew up with my mom and grandparents in what was a loving home—for a time. When my mom left us to go out into the world on her own, I began to see and feel just how cruel the world could be.

My mom turned to men who claimed to be sincere. They had selfish intentions, which would turn my mom inside out. They forced her into situations that would affect all our lives and, eventually, destroy our family. Like so many fathers in this nation, mine ran from his responsibility. When my mom was 17, she lost her mother—who was in a game that took her life. Sadly, my mom inherited that lifestyle, a vicious cycle that spread like a plague from generation to generation. This plague consisted of drugs, violence, gangs, prostitution and death.—This is a sad reality in a lot of our communities across the nation.

I've seen my mom beaten. I can remember standing in my bedroom crying over it, wishing I were as big as the man beating her. I've seen my mom strung out on drugs. I, too, have been physically abused as well as sexually abused, carrying welts on my back from childhood beatings. Once, when I was only three years old, I was injected with heroin by one of my mom's boyfriends. My four sisters, who were taken away to foster homes, experienced the same treatment—and it was the same in so-called foster care.

I was out in the streets alone at the age of 14, gang-bangin' and drug-dealing—poisoning our community. I've looked down on a lifeless body, frozen in time, laid out on the cold streets. It was my little sister, shot in the head, killed at the age of 15. I looked down on her in her casket, looking like a mannequin. I've lost so many peers in the "game," and seen too many people I love swallowed up by the insanity of this cycle of ignorance. I got my baby's mama pregnant at the age of 14. We were both barely turning 15 when she gave birth to our daughter. We were both lost in the streets.

I've been locked up almost all of my teenage and adult life, molded by a system built not to rehabilitate but to enslave me and my people. I've been trapped in a "systemic slavery" that has pushed me behind in life.

Even my daughter has suffered, shot in the foot at the age of five by gang-bangers I thought were my "homies." But, I was locked away here in prison at the time, unable to protect her from that madness. Today, both my baby's mother and my mom are strung out on crack cocaine. Worse, both are living with the HIV virus. My heart cries just thinking that my daughters now have to face these harsh realities of life. My heart cries for all the others who know this struggle.

I remember seeing a commercial that said, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." I never really grasped that saying until now. For me, it means that gaining knowledge is the path we should take.

"Daddy Jason"

Shamir Rathel Abdul Ash Shakur
(Jason Hoster)

Since I am half-black and half-white, I have struggled with my identity, and experienced low self-esteem, never trying to smile or enjoy what I have been blessed with. I always thought it was me against the world. I have caused hell and wreaked havoc and pain on so many others, just so someone else might feel the pain thundering and beating my soul into a shadow.

I used to be hardcore, a bad ass, running the streets gang-banging, chasing women, using, abusing and selling drugs, living the life of a street thug. I did it to the fullest, all the while hurting those who truly loved me from the beginning—my adopted family.

I came to prison as an utter disgrace to my family, friends and, even, to myself. My parents haven't spoken to me in eight years. I was married to a beautiful woman and blessed by Allah with a handsome son. I've only seen him once in seven years. His mother is remarried now, happy with another, not me. My son calls another man "Daddy." It kills me over and over again when he calls me "Daddy Jason," or plain old Jason, with no real recognition of me as his father. But I cannot say a single word.

I can no longer laugh or talk or dream. I can't cry on the outside, so I cry in my sleep, waking up with tears running down my cheeks.—When the uncle of my neighbor (next-door cellmate), Uncle "Bud," died recently from an overdose of crystal meth, we both cried inside our souls, refusing to show "weakness."—All

my feelings were shut out at the prison gates. It's that cold in here, even if it's one hundred degrees outside. I was told by a corrections officer after one of the times I tried to hang myself that I had screamed out, "let me die!" My other, multiple suicide attempts since I've been here have failed.—Last year, my best friend hung himself. I was upset because I had failed, jealous that he had escaped this hell.

There are countless divorces that lead to suicides or homicides behind this barbed wire fence that is the outer flesh of the prison. I've seen murder behind these walls, and not murder the easy way as by a drive-by shooting. So much hatred and evil dwells here, and it grows with the coming of each new inmate, male and female. Gender plays no role in the hurt, loss and pain that more than two million inmates in this country experience away from society.

Though our skin be rough as leather,
our souls are more precious than black sapphire,
and we taught the world—
Never forget the children!

Shamir

On the Other Side of the Wall is My Daughter

L. J. Young, Jr.

At the age of 18, I got locked up for 18 years. I had no understanding of how my imprisonment would hurt my family, not counting myself.

When I came to prison, I lost more than my freedom. I lost my family. Most of all, I lost the one thing I loved more than life itself, my first love and my only child. Doing my time inside this world of hate, my heart has died. The only thing that keeps me going is the love I have for my aunt and the thought of my daughter, the thought of loving her.

Prison has hurt me even more than by locking me away from my family. I had had no one in my life to talk with when I was growing up into a young man. Here, I have no one but myself and the walls of my cell. I have sat in my cell a lot of times and cried to myself for the pain I have caused my Auntie by being in prison. I have cried over being absent from my daughter's life, so she could know me and I could never see her grow into a young lady. I am 37 years old now, and my daughter is 18 years old. I have tried with all my heart to build a relationship with her, but nothing I have said or done has brought us together. I never imagined that loving someone who may not love you would hurt so badly. It really does—though I really don't know if she loves me or hates me. I don't know if she cares or even thinks about me at all.

As for my Auntie, whom I love more than my own mother, I hate to call her, knowing the pain she has inside her heart because of my incarceration.

When we do talk, she always cries. I ask her not to cry and tell her, "I'll be all right, Auntie. I love you."

So-Called Friends

Sean Washington

I started doing time in Boston, Massachusetts, where I was born and raised. In 1989, I was committed to the Department of Youth Services (DYS), a juvenile detention center. I was 13 years old, and was sentenced to do time in the DYS until 18 years old. Because I was young, people always tried me, thinking they could run over me. They would start trouble and try to intimidate me into joining their gang. I was released, though, in January 1993, when I was 17.

When I was released, I did well. I got a job at KFC, and worked eight hours a day. But, I was still hanging around old friends, the ones I was hanging with before I went to DYS, the same people I had been out there running drugs for. In July 1994, I caught my first adult case, and was sentenced to 5-7 years in the state prison.

I found myself locked up with guys doing life. Now, there are certain rules I quickly learned you have to live by in state prison. The most important rule is, to mind your own business. There are so many people in prison with so many types of attitudes, a little argument can explode into a big fight, with one person or maybe 10 people at once. There are a lot of gangs in prison. You will run into people who will make you join their gang, and if you decide to join and try to get out of it, you will have a problem.—There is really nothing good about prison. There are a lot of distractions that involve life and death.

I went home early, in 1996. Once again, I started working and doing what I had to do to stay home. And, my son was born in 1997. In January 2000,

however, I got into a confrontation with someone and ended back in prison, with a sentence of 10-12 years.

My family was sick of me going back to prison. They wanted to give up on me, because they felt I had given up on life and on myself. Here I was in a state prison again, this time with a 10-12-year sentence. And now, I was the father of a two-year-old son. My son's mother became mad at me for leaving her out there as a single parent. Whenever I call the house, she gives me attitude. But, she is a good mother, and she never says anything bad about me to my son. She gives me the opportunity to have as much of a father-son relationship with my son as possible.—This was in Massachusetts.

After I served six years of that sentence, my mother got sick with breast cancer. Since she lived in New Mexico, I went through a lot of legal wrangling to get transferred to a prison here, to be closer to my mother. It took me eight months. Now that I'm closer to her, I feel a little better—though my son is all the way back in Boston. Every time I talk to him by telephone, he asks me, "Daddy, when are you coming back?" and "When are you coming home so you can take me to the park?" He asks these kinds of questions every time I call home.

Doing time causes you a lot of emotional problems. More than that, though, doing time causes emotional problems for your loved ones. As for your friends, if you're sentenced to a lot of time, when you get out, a lot of them might be dead. On the other hand, people you knew might wind up in a cell with you. Soon, though, you will no longer have friends outside. Everybody you were cool with and ran the streets with will no longer be in touch with you. You might have one good friend out there, who will look out for you a little while, accept your

collect calls, or send you some money or some pictures, but, after a while, even that friend will go away. All those girls you were dealing with will have moved on, on to the next man, because nothing lasts when you're doing a lot of time. All those nice clothes and sneakers you used to wear out there will be forgotten. You will be used to wearing what the state gives you, usually one color.

Finally, you come to see that some of those you thought had your back have gone behind your back. When the cops came around and started putting pressure on them, they've talked to the police. I've learned that a lot of people will help the police or the DEA even by snitching on a friend if it can get them out of doing time. And, I realize now that everybody who claimed to be my friend was not.

Breakdown of the Family

Alphonso D. Frazier

One of the after-effects of coming to prison and doing time has been the loss of the respect by my family members. It also seems to have caused a chain reaction among those who looked up to me to follow in my footsteps and end up in prison. In my case, it was my son who ended up in prison, for much the same charges on which I went down. He was found guilty-by-association, and was sentenced to seven years because of his cousin.

My coming to prison has also had an effect on my daughter's life. She had depended on me for moral support. When I went to prison, her life became unstable. She felt she was not loved, and began to have low self-esteem. This low self-esteem caused her to do things to fit in with crowds that put her on a downward spiral. My attempts from here to help her were met with resistance, since I was not really there for her, not there to comfort her.

My mother, too, was wounded by my coming to prison. I was her first-born, the one who should have looked out for her. Mom was an alcoholic, and she was depressed a lot because of her drinking. Her drinking negatively influenced how she treated her children, as well as, the men in her life.

My youngest brother was also affected by my incarceration, in that he had no more role model. He had looked up to me. Even my grandchildren lost something when I went to prison. I could not be there to bring them the voice of an elder. Some of my grandchildren are teenagers now, some of whom I have never seen.

Finally, I lost my wife on account of my imprisonment, by being absent and unable to comfort her when she needed affection. Thirteen years in prison takes its toll on a relationship. My wife needed personal contact, and I could not provide it for her. She suffered from a lack of affection, and, eventually, I lost her love.

My incarceration has disrupted my whole life and the life of my whole family.

Prison Has Its Price

Shafic B. Ahmed Pena

On the streets and in the penitentiary, I'm known as "G-Baby." I'm 28 years old and I'm from Houston, Texas. I've been locked up for seven-and-a-half years. During that time, I've lost so much.

I was married at one time, but my wife has long since gone. She was murdered in a drive-by shooting. We had a son, but, since my incarceration, he has been placed in a foster home. He is eight years old now, and it hurts me not to be there for him. But, I have to live with that pain all the time.

In prison, you have to fight to stay alive and hustle to survive. Of course, you can live on what the state provides. There are three meals a day, for example, but they are only enough to keep you alive. In addition, not only can't you choose what you eat, you won't want to eat the food once you realize how it's handled.

There are all kinds of people in prison. A lot of them are not very nice. There are people here who will hurt you or kill you for any reason. There are rapists here, and you don't know what they may be thinking about doing to you. There is no privacy, and you wage a constant struggle to find your own space. There are always eyes on you, and there is nowhere to go and nowhere to escape from them. If a riot breaks out, there is nowhere to run, so people can hurt or even kill you, and the officers will only treat all the inmates the same. They will back you into a corner, scared, where you will be throwing up and unable to see from the tear gas they use to put down a riot.

Everybody on the streets wants to be hard and cool. There is nothing cool about doing time in the penitentiary. Time slows down in prison. And, you have time to realize you may be there because of some of your street friends, who saved themselves from doing time by testifying against you. You will be carrying all the weight, and you will be doing all the time in prison—and on your own.

Strangers in the Family

Tommy Wayne Willis, Sr.

My father was what one might call a "playa," who lived the street life. He was gunned down on December 17, 1975. His death left my mother alone to take care of three small kids. She was in her early 20s. I was her first child, born in 1971. Through heartaches, pain, struggle and perseverance, my mother put herself through college, and became a nurse. She got married again, to a decent man. Even though I called this man "Dad," I never truly bonded with him. I never really let go of the "what-ifs" about my biological dad.

I was an outgoing child, and participated in a lot of extra-curricular activities, like basketball, soccer, baseball, boxing and Boy Scouts. I had a lot of friends, and I was a favorite in my family among my numerous cousins and uncles and aunts. I loved school all my life, and was an A and B student. I was even on the Spelling Bee team. When I got to high school, I became bigger, stronger and faster. I was on the varsity football team by the time I was a sophomore, and I won the "Youngest Toughest Player" award that year. My mother and my step-dad were proud of my accomplishments, and I continued to excel in sports all the way through high school for which I was often featured in articles in the local newspaper. Under the photograph in my high school yearbook, the caption read, "Most Athletic" and "Most Likely to Succeed." I graduated in the top 10% of my class, and received a scholarship to play football at a university.

For three-and-a-half years, everything went well. I lost focus, though. I went from a senior in college, with only one semester left to graduate with a Bachelor's degree, to sitting in the county jail with serious charges hanging over my head. When I went to trial, my girlfriend was six-months pregnant. My mother and siblings had to travel hundreds of miles to see me. I remember looking back in the courtroom at how many friends and family members were there for me. The ones who were unable to travel wrote letters to the judge on my behalf. I didn't realize how many lives I had touched throughout my life until that moment.

It has been over 13 years since then. I sit behind these walls still affecting the people I love most, especially my son, whom I barely know. I write to him weekly and call him when I'm able. He tells me he misses me a lot. His mother has told me that he sits in his room and cries sometimes after reading a letter from me. My friends still keep in touch after all this time, and they let me know how much they miss me. But, my mother and siblings are strangers because I'm locked up in a different state than where they live.

It has been a hard road, and it has been lonely. But, I've endured. I have three years left to do on my sentence. It's going to be interesting reacquainting myself to the strangers who are my family. With dedication, patience and, by far and foremost, the Most High, I will be all right.

Melyssia

James Wilson

The day you were born was the happiest day of my life. Watching you sleep for the first 24 hours was so hard, but we made it through. I stayed with you for a couple of days. I knew my job was on the line, but I didn't care. Waking up in the middle of the night, making your bottles and changing your diapers was kind of rough. To me, though, it didn't seem enough. Playing around, I would see a little smile.—That was a trip.—When I was gone, it seemed like an eternity away from your sweet little eyes.

I couldn't wait to see more of the things to come. Listening to Nelly's "Country Grammar," you stood up on the dresser and tried to dance. I smiled. My baby was starting to grow. Once you learned how to stand, it was over. I came home from work one day, and you somehow knew. Once I closed the door, you screamed "Da!" meaning me, and you tried to take your first step! Wow!

Now daddy has to catch up with all the new things. When your mom told me how you could turn off the television and the VCR, I thought, "What else am I missing?" I remember how you used to give your mom grief when it was time for you to go to sleep at night if I hadn't gotten home from work. It was the only way you would go to sleep. These may not seem like important things, but I'm a first-time father, and they mean everything to me.

The day I got arrested, I heard you screaming for me. It was a while before I talked to you or heard your voice again, and that was only over the telephone.

You said, "Hi, Dad," and "Love you." Those words brought tears to my eyes. My baby would be growing up without me.

Inseparable

Sergio Enriquez

On March 18, 2005, I was sentenced to three years and three months in prison. It was a sad reality to know that I was facing prison time. Before that, I had never been to jail for more than a day. This time, it was a long sentence, 39 months. I couldn't believe it. The knowledge that I had to do prison time brought me down to a deep depression. It caused me to lose a lot of weight. It drained me emotionally and physically. Most depressing, though, was the idea of being separated from my little girl, whom I love very much. We had never been apart before. We were inseparable.

This unfortunate, life-changing event began when I stabbed a man in the chest twice. Because of that, I lost all I had—my wife, my business and, most importantly, my daughter. The man I stabbed broke into my house and attacked me. I thought my actions were justified. The jury didn't see it that way. Messing with weed and alcohol, I admit, contributed to my coming to prison. Weed really is a "gateway drug." It does lead to using more dangerous drugs, and alcohol certainly doesn't help.

Prison has changed me. Before being locked up, I didn't think about the consequences of my actions. Now, I think before I act. I've also thought more about spiritual things. On the streets, I had no regard for things of the spirit. Also, I've been forced to deal with my alcoholism. Before, the bottle led to my divorce and robbed me of my business. Alcohol strained the relationship among my three sons and me.

In prison, every aspect of your life is controlled. You might even say your entire life is micro-managed. You're told when to get up and when to go to bed. And, you are denied the simple things in life, like watching the sun come up in the morning, hanging out with your friends, going out on weekends with your wife, or girlfriend. If you have kids, you'll miss out on watching them grow up. You may not get any visits either. Your friends may desert you. Prison is a depressing place.

Old School Brother

Ronald Joe Archie

I had my freedom once. I was working and doing okay when a couple of my friends asked me if I wanted to make some real money, easy. I said yes, and asked how. They told me we could sell some weed or crack cocaine and make lots of money. So I tried it.—They didn't tell me I could get nine years for selling one rock of cocaine and three or four years for selling weed.

Everything seemed to be going along well when, one night, we were out doing our thing and the police came from all around. They found one rock of cocaine in my pocket, threw me down to the ground on my face, handcuffed me and took me to jail. When I was in jail, I looked for a letter from my friends. Nobody wrote me. Nobody came to see me, to ask how I was doing. The only mail I got was from my family. They kept telling me how hurt and disappointed they were in me.

Soon, I entered a life in which I couldn't go anywhere or do anything I wanted. I couldn't wear what I wanted to wear anymore. I couldn't talk when I got ready anymore. And, while I know it's the same for women, I had to fight to stay a man—meaning there are people in prison who are sick and want to make love to you, so you have to fight to keep yourself pure. You are told when to get up and when to go to sleep. You are forced to be around people who don't like you, and people whom you don't like. You can't get up and go to the 'fridge to get a Coke or make a sandwich or anything like that anymore. Life stops in here.

At night, when they lock the doors at 9:00 p.m., you come face to face with yourself. You cry and you don't give a hoot who hears you. You feel like nobody cares. Some of your brothers and sisters have completely stopped writing you back.

It has taken a while for my family to stop hurting and start writing back to me. They tell me they're sorry I am in prison—but that it is my own fault. They love me, but they are mad, and still hurt. They are praying for God to keep me safe and in good health.

SECTION VI

POEMS BY GRACE

HOW DO I FIND MY WAY BACK HOME?
by grace (dm) 12/20/06

How do I find my way back home?

A stretch of time behind prison walls
My lifeline to family is through phone calls
And I know I'm not the person I used to be
as I look in the mirror at #5794183

I know I've made mistakes/that's why I'm here
and there's a doctor and clergy to lend an ear
But after my time is served/and I do get out
How do I reconnect/without taking the same route?

Who will open the door/and give me another chance?
I'll be turned down for jobs/once my rapsheet is glanced
It's not that I want to ever come back here
But out there/options are few/this is my fear

How do I find my way back home?

Once you go to prison/your life is never the same
Even if you straigthen out/and quit the street game
As I look around/at all the many faces I see
Too many times I see faces/Black like me

I know others out there/play the same games I do
But they don't seem to be here/I think the system is skewed
I mean/we are not the majority commiting the crimes
But we're sent to prison more/the majority of the time

When I get out of here/I'll head back to the hood
This is home to me/it's where I know I'm understood
So the trick to the game is/how do I begin again?
Without making the same mistakes/with the same old friends

How do I find my way back home?

I've done the religion thing/said prayers everyday
Even forgave the freakin' judge/that sent me away
I've stayed in touch with family/as best I could
Even did job training/knock on wood

But how do I begin again/after being away?

Will people even trust me/believe in what I say?
And what type of jobs/will be available to me?
Can I support family/on minimum wage?/just me?

I really want to make it/be a success this time
But odds are against me/even though I've done my time
I wonder will the community/let me back in
Will they give me a chance?/Treat me as kin?

How do I find my way back home?????????

BEEN BEAT DOWN
by grace (dm) 12/21/06

Been beat down/thrown around
seems like all over town
Not sure at this point
if the community wants me around

First foster care/was a life long trip
Then "juvie" hall /'til 18 I flipped

Now prison is my deal/for another year
Just following in the foot steps/dad left here

And when I get out of this home of walls
Gonna make sure/I don't trip and fall

Never had no one/who really cared
Don't want to be judged/that's not fair

Just want a chance to prove to me
That I can be better/than I be

So/here I sit and do my time
And yeah/I did do that stupid crime

In here/there is much that I will learn
Got to be smart/so I don't get burned

In this country being Black/can be a liability
And if I've been locked up/only a convict you'd see

But when I get out/if no one helps me
They can't blame me/if here again
I be...we'll see.

CHOOSE ME
by grace (dm) 12/26/06

O.K., I'm sendin' prayers/straight up there
Cause I heard people say/you're supposed to care

I hope you are listenin'/cause I'm only 10
Could you send my dad/some new best friends?

My mom says dad's trying to make ends meet
Ain't there better jobs/than stuff on the street?

He went away with friends/and didn't come back
Mom says things are tough/for men who are Black

She says choices are few/and sometimes we choose wrong
Now I won't see my dad/for two years/that's long

So could you send dad new friends?/Mom says with 'tegrity

So when he gets out

I pray this time/he chooses/me.

MOM'S TOO!
by grace(dm) 12/29/06

I remember/very clearly/how he'd suckle at my breast
His little fingers/would tangle in my hair
His big brown eyes would meet mine
It was such a sweet and quiet time

And when the judge said I'd be sent away
five years I got/but angry I'm not
Cause I made a mistake/we all do
one time or another

My son/was just one/and had taken his first steps
And I wanted so much for him
I didn't want him to be another Black child in need
Growing up selling weed/and thinking
this is his only destiny

So I and another/pulled this job
Thought it was too easy
Should have known better
when my stomach got queasy

Guess someone was trying to tell me
something wasn't right/on that
cold and rainy autumn night
I should have known better

Well/what's done is done
Now the State cares for my son
I worry/and sometimes cry at night
and pray my child/my little man
without me/be alright

Just started school
and he knows how to spell
He sends me letters/and cards
from out there/this is truly hell

My little man/my child/my son
means the world to me
Soon I'll get out/I'll get him back
I promised/you see

Gotta find a job/really work hard
Prove to all I am a good mom/some how
Right now/my mind is filled with worry
over my little man/doing the best
that he says he can

So I can be proud of "him"
Yet/I'm the one who's locked in
I wonder/will he ever respect
me again....will any one?

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